

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 1

Alps' back struck the pantry wall, the wolf huffing out a hot, anxious breath, hand moving down to long hair, at the level of his tummy. A sack of grain fell from the bottom shelf from the shuffling of his feet, forcing the wolf to consider where he was, and the chances of being caught in the main kitchen pantry in a lustful act. The wolf was blushing scarlet, gasping loudly as he looked down to see a white muzzle overtake his already heavily aroused, tightly swollen member. He gritted his teeth, lowering his own muzzle, hips trembling as he felt that sensual, trained tongue curl into a hammock along the underside of his girth, and warm, fervent suckling began. This was utterly heavenly, it was the purest pleasure Alps knew. He could not ask for a kinder act to be rendered to him, but... but what was he *doing*?

"Nnnh... We... We shouldn't do this. It would be frowned upon... yes?" he asked, his chest feeling tight with anxiousness. He looked down plaintively at the one who gazed back up to him, her hand wrapping around his aching, swollen girth and stroking him up and down slowly and rhythmically ahead of her muzzle. One violet eye and one green eye showed a nearly begging expression. Alps inhaled deeply. He watched as Luna, not taking her eyes off of him, lowered her head slowly and engulfed his pink cock yet again. Alps felt the pure bliss of her deep mouth sinking over him, her hand stroking his heavy sack. It tightened just a bit against his body, so eager to provide the priestess with exactly what she was after. "What if we're caught? Not everyone will understand." The white lupine male huffed, feeling her tongue swirl around his cock tip. Even Alps didn't understand. How could he let it come to this? He knew the truth about her now. Did that not change a thing? Luna finally slipped her mouth off of him and spoke, looking affectionately at the member she pumped in her hand slowly and wetly.

"Alps, we don't have to hide this. No one's going to judge a High Priestess. For the seven hundred years of suffering I endured alone in that wasteland, is it not for me to enjoy my freedom? So there are rules and taboos. What part did those taboos play in freeing me? You freed me. And you had no problem with this before. You were still my son then, you know." Alps grimaced, and sank to his knees, moving to hold Luna's shoulders and slip his member out of her reach. He didn't want to cause her difficulty in her transition to Amanian society. She frowned as his nose touched hers.

"It's just that those who would not understand would never understand, no matter how we explained, and I want your stay here to be pleasant, and long." Alps explained.

Luna lowered herself to all fours before him and looked at him with a stern expression. Alps gritted his teeth again. It was a scolding expression. She did an about-face and hiked her tail over her back, grinning at the younger wolf over her shoulder. "No, wait, d-" She sank back hard to his lap. As she did, she tucked her fingers down between her thighs to grab his aching shaft and direct it sure and true. He groaned hotly as he felt her hot, soft flesh yield achingly around him. She ground him in deep, her puffy mound fuzzily stroking at the base of his cock.

"Now... You can't say you don't like thaaaat..." she crooned softly. Alps throbbed inside her, holding her hips, trying to draw back, but her hips sank back with his, and he could not draw back enough, his back was to the wall. Why did he have to be so heavily aroused? His body was not listening to his mind at all. He could not control himself, and, shocked, even found himself pushing back into the priestess when he found he could to draw out. She groaned out softly, "Very good boy... Much better, yes?" Alps huffed hotly over Luna's shoulder. He couldn't stop. Was she using some kind of essence art upon him? Was this natural? Was he really in so little control of his body? He had given in to Rios and the stakes were possibly higher there. Was he so weak as to not control this aspect of his masculinity? Everyone had weaknesses.

"We'll get caught..." Alps panted softly, but his hips were already moving, his thick, longing shaft slipping easily, snugly in and out of his mother's clutching, clenching sex. This was so depraved, but he couldn't help it. She was right, he had done this to her so heavily and wonderfully before, and it must have made Luna sad to think she would be denied this from the only one left in the world that she knew and trusted. The former slave leaned over her back, panting hotly as his hips collided with hers.

"Just make sure... to lay it out over my back, Aris... Ah-hah-hah... I want it over my back... I want to feel it running down my sides... Nnn... NNnn!" the priestess panted happily. Alps winced again as she used his real name, another reminder that this was his mother, and what he was doing was so very taboo. Even growing up as a slave, he knew that the accusation of relations with a parent was the kind of wording hurled just before a fist. But here he was, not even slowing his hips anymore as he pounded away hotly, grinding in deep occasionally and loving the depth, the feeling of penetrating her lusty, needy body, and hearing the hot cries of pleasure that issued forth from her shaking body. He slapped his hips harder on hers. It was not taking long, but perhaps it was that sense of danger and forbidden action that was magnifying this. Luna squeaked out happily, and then gave an anxious, rising cry. Then another cry, this one loud, and sinking hard. Her pussy convulsed hard around his twitching, pistoning member, her honey splashing into his lap as he slapped his thighs hard on her haunches through it.

Then, Alps gasped as he felt his nerves all light up at once, responding rapidly to the knowledge that she was cumming. He slipped himself free in a jarring motion and gripped his meaty shaft, hand pumping only twice more over his length for how close he was, and he went off like a fountain. The wolf gave a wavering deep groan as white

ribbons of heavy seed painted over Luna's back and rounded motherly rump, the lady wolf in front of him lowering her chest and still obviously convulsing from her climax. She had pushed herself to the ground to slide her hand between her thighs, stroking her clit to stoke the fires of her climax through their full course of heaven upon her quaking form.

Alps dizzily gazed at her, as she fluttered her fingers away at her sex, his heavy, gooey stripes of seed clinging to her shamefully. Alps breathlessly watched her, unable to believe what he had just done. He was so very out of control, but as a slave, he would have to do anything his mistress had asked him, even if it was taboo or depraved. How was this that different? Was it just because this was the life he was trained and developed for? Or was there something genuinely wrong with him?

"Oh... Pop, what are you doing?" a different voice asked. He jerked his head up and looked to the now open door of the pantry. Rios was standing there with a younger male, perhaps twelve summers old. He had violet eyes, a dark muzzle and just a few speckling grayish black spots over his body, even on his tail. He had spiky hair, dark with light tips, a very unusual, but strong-looking lad. He looked a bit confused and stunned, but Rios looked utterly horrified. Luna looked up and murmured softly.

"Ah-heh... Heh... Looks like you were right. We got caught. Aris, be a dear and see if my grandson could run and grab us a towel." Alps was simply astonished at how completely unfazed Luna was by the scenario. Her grandson just caught her in one of the most compromising positions one can be in with his own father. What level of shamelessness was this?

"I... I..." Alps stammered. Not taking her staring, wide eyes off of the pair, Rios slowly closed the door.

Alps sat up, bolt-upright. He looked forward in his semi-dark bedroom, and then winced a bit as he felt the oversensitive pang of post-climax and hot, wet, swirling attention to his throbbing cock. There was someone under his blanket, having some fun while he slept. He pulled the blanket up and looked down with a sigh of actual relief at his beloved Nita. The same thick streamers of his opalescent release were on her muzzle, cheeks, and chest. He had been half afraid that Luna would be there.

"You started dreaming and you were... bouncing your hips so I guess I just kind of helped myself." Nita chuckled, reaching into the end table by the bed and withdrawing a soft hand-towel that she had taken to keeping close by for the sake of tidiness at night. She cleaned herself up a bit, but had to tend to Alps' soaked tummy as well. He panted heavily as he looked at Nita, so glad it was her. He was so very, very glad.

What was wrong with him, having a dream like that? Was he that afraid he was not in control of his life? Was it guilt from what he'd done to Luna, or guilt over what he'd done to Rios that provoked that?

"Heh... I am glad that you were able to enjoy it instead of things just going to waste against your back without you even knowing it until morning." The white wolf chuckled weakly. If that had happened, they would have awakened glued together. That would have been an embarrassing call for help early in the morning, to be sure. Almost everyone was aware of their relationship by now, but even the castle guards were a little mystified over what Nita saw in her slave.

"What were you dreaming about?" Nita asked, perhaps curious to find out if it was about her.

"Uh..." Alps stammered.

"C'mon, it can't be that bad." The queen giggled and flumphed Alps with a pillow. "It's okay if it wasn't about me, you have lots of really good friends, honey. In the end, I was the one who got the treat." The green-furred lady lupine giggled a bit, wiping a little droplet of his cream off of her blue silk night gown.

"Oh, it could be." Alps rumbled, suddenly trying to think of something else to say the dream was. Would Nita think something was wrong with him for it?

"You have no need of hiding around me, love. I will not change my stance on you no matter what you say, but I will scold you if you hide from me or don't say what's really on your mind." Nita sat up, stroking Alps' face as he caught his breath. He was a little stunned that he could sleep through what had probably been very wonderful oral sex.

"You may regret asking." Alps chuckled meekly.

"Let me decide that." Nita crooned.

"I had ducked away in the pantry with Luna, and got caught as soon as I climaxed all over her back by Rios, and what I assume to be my... maybe twelve year old son." Alps blurted it all out at once so that Nita would get the full effect and image to see just how willing she was to hear it.

The queen burst into a heaving fit of laughter. Alps furrowed his brow. It was depraved and reckless, not funny. He tilted his head. Why in the world was she laughing?

"Alps, oh honey, you are putting too much thought into that!" Nita barked out between fits of laughter. Alps flattened his ears a bit at that. He thought he was being too relaxed about the whole thing, actually. "Sweetie, neither of you knew, and no harm

was done. Even if you still bear some attraction, that's not abnormal. Even if you did know, some physical attraction would not be unheard of. Your mother is beautiful, and as a trained priestess, she is skilled at seduction so appealing that she constantly provides sensual and attractive body language which attracts every male in the castle. Don't be ashamed of it. Luna is so happy to have you back, and she doesn't regret what she did. She's not worried about it, and you shouldn't be either. If the thought is tangling your fur too badly though, you can talk with Misty. She's a good listener and knows a lot about curious matters of the mind." Alps sighed a bit, nodding at that as Nita held both his hands reassuringly. He looked down at his softening member. Nita may have been the one whose mouth he was physically enjoying, but it was his thoughts of Luna that made him so easily explode, unable to even wake up before it happened. Alps shook his head a little and hopped up to get himself cleaned up a bit more. He would probably adjust to the revelation of his mother's reintroduction into his life, and the reality of his bloodline continued by the Asuna empress. The dreams surely would pass. If not, he would take Nita's advice and speak with Misty on these rather embarrassing troubles.

"Today is the meeting for long term strategy, Alps. We should get cleaned up nicely. I am very curious to find out what you and Vhale have spent so long discussing." The queen undressed, letting Alps appreciate her beautiful body a bit, his tail wagging as he watched her. She padded into the adjoining bath and lit the water heater to draw a nice warm bath for the pair. Alps rubbed the back of his head a bit. That might well have been another cause for such an odd dream. There was a lot of responsibility thrust upon him of late causing him unusual stress. He had spent so long discussing possible outcomes of the recent revelations and had worked side by side with Luna and Vhale. It had been more pleasant than he thought it would be. Luna had stopped trying to "accidentally" hurt Vhale. The misguided Letai student who was responsible for the fall of his own kind had cheered up a bit with the prospect of actually helping to fix it. Alps had gotten to know both a bit better in the process.

Luna was very strong in her leadership role, but needed Alps to help her adjust to how the world had changed, who was in charge, what was good to eat and drink, and all the other general aspects of living seven hundred years after she'd been locked away. Vhale took to the changes a bit more easily, as he wasn't making many choices on his own. He seemed to be okay with being the queen's new slave, now that Alps had dropped that title. The former white-furred slave stood as Nita's life mate. There had not been anything in the way of official ceremony, but no one denied it anymore. Vhale himself was a little difficult at first because he spent so much time brooding about his guilt, but after enough prodding from Alps and Luna to focus on repairing the damage, he seemed to embrace the thought of moving forward wholeheartedly, and the mother and son saw him slowly change his personality to one of thoughtful selflessness. It was very hard to believe that this was the same one responsible for killing so many, and ultimately, while he still felt he should perish for his crimes, Vhale did agree that it was selfish to do so before he had bothered to *fix* any of it.

Alps felt that Vhale was actually relieved about his new role and complete lack of

any power. Only he or Nita could allow him to harness the essence. He was banned from its use otherwise. Luna explained to her son that Vhale likely felt safe for the first time. He was safe from making the same mistakes that had caused so much despair.

Nita beckoned Alps to the bath, shaking him out of his reflection. He happily joined her, embracing and snuggling as hands moved along bodies, and they shared a soothing, but ultimately invigorating grooming. They took their time, but looked ahead to the very important meeting that would commence at noon.

Bone had his own chair. That was the first thing that struck Alps about the meeting room as he entered. For whatever reason, Bone had his own chair. Misty was sitting by Nita, and Nidaja was at the queen's other side. On Nidaja's side sat first Misha, then Uri, and, much taller than Uri, Lyat. On Misty's side sat Luna, then Mannus, and then Bone. As far as Alps could tell, Reika was not even present. He took his seat at the far end of the table, facing Nita. Everyone greeted him casually enough. This was not exactly a formal meeting. The priestess wore a green and gold set of robes that she had taken to wearing since she returned, and of course, Nita was dressed in her usual royal attire, Nidaja in black leather armor gilded in silver. Alps himself wore the black uniform with gold trim that Nidaja had him wear in Jalana to show him as part of the royal house.

He was no longer a slave, but in truth it changed very little about the dynamic of his life in Diera. He was still loyal to the queen and when she took him as her mate for life Amanian custom subjugated him to her anyway. His life with his friends was largely unchanged, and for this he was very grateful. After taking his seat, he looked at the bone club, freshly painted and looking pristine with a new feather head-dress banded to the top and clearly painted interested-looking eyes. Alps watched it a bit as everyone finished their greetings. He could hear Bone when he held the thing; it had essence of its own. The unusual implement that Reika used as a weapon, and as a friend, was intelligent and free-thinking, somehow alive and not. It existed in some way between the world of the living and somewhere else. Alps knew that the link was to that strange realm he was still only just learning about... The nether. Could such a thing connected to that place be trusted to sit in at a meeting? He supposed that it did not make much difference. If Bone was a spy, their endeavors would have long since ended. Lyat seemed to notice Alps perplexed by the weapon's lone presence.

"Sister is wanting Bone to be in meeting because she is being busy." Lyat said in his deep, raspy tone. Alps regarded the hyena, clad in his own leather armor, looking a lot more dangerous than Nidaja, and considerably larger. His spiky crimson hair was carefully groomed and styled to the form that he seemed to feel made him a more fearsome foe. The strong warrior had accompanied his sister to Diera to give the crystal to Nita, risking his very life to do so in order to bring the white wolf home. Nita's beloved had locked himself and the general in the crystal with a Shadowfall spell. It was testament to Lyat's bravery and sense of duty, as this dangerous act had been

committed to protect Lyat's homeland and the lives of his loved ones. Alps arched a brow at the hyena's comment.

"Busy? Doing what? She didn't get herself a job during your short stay, did she?" the wolf asked. He had assumed that the royal family was tending to their needs while they were in the city, so there would have been little cause for the younger (more unstable) female hyena to have to find work, and they were not allowed to wander the city without guards to protect them from misunderstanding citizens of Diera anyway. Lyat shrugged a bit, his flaring black pauldrons lifting a bit.

"She is thinking we leave soon. Says she is being friendly with black-furred guard person before she leaves. Reika is being nice to him while we stay, and he is being nice to her, so she is being sure they is friends." He said. Nita looked up at that, flattening her ears in apparent disbelief.

"Wait, Uncle Lunaris? She's friends with Lunaris?" she asked.

"Yes, that is being the name." Lyat stated.

"Huh..." Nidaja mused. "I would not have expected him to like hanging around someone so unpredictable."

"She is not the type to be caring if he likes it." Lyat explained.

"Oh dear." Nita murmured. "I'm sure he will be fine. Anyway, the uh... Bone... is here in her stead, as Lyat has said. She seems sure that her weapon will fill her in on everything." The queen shrugged. Nidaja had explained Bone to her, but the queen was still a bit skeptical to the idea. Alps did not want to push the subject because he felt that his own experiences with the matter would make the queen uncomfortable and he didn't know enough yet to tell her any different than what she might fear.

"Now that we are all here, I suggest we discuss the business at hand." Misty proclaimed, trying to put the moment back on track. As head of the High Council, she was often charged with doing exactly that. Alps nodded and spoke.

"Right. For the past three months since Vhale has been back from his isolation in the wastelands of his own design, I have given a great deal of thought, and spoken at length with High Priestess Luna and Vhale himself over what possible options we have for dealing with this dark avatar of the essence." The former slave leaned over the table. Everyone peered at him, transfixed, hanging on his every word. Alps had to pause for a moment to take stock of the absurdity of the scenario. A couple years before this, he was living in Luca unable to even determine his own meals, much less the course of action for an embattled people.

"Go on, Aris." Luna prodded, seeing her son falter a little to appreciate the moment. Alps looked back to her, and felt his ears warm as images of the previous

night's dream flooded his mind. He cleared his throat and looked back at Nita quickly. Her own ears tinted rose as she seemed to realize that Alps had thought about it. She smiled to him reassuringly, however. Alps continued.

"Ah, yes. Um. The course before us will be difficult and full of risk no matter which path we take. However, Luna and her majesty both agree that the most likely course to succeed will not be a direct attempt at vanquishing our foe. He might well expect us to take that action if he felt we had the capability. We should not let him suspect even for a second that the balance has changed at all. We do not, as of yet, have the ability to take him on alone, much less his army. Our very best option would be to give us more time, to push back his army and prevent them from attacking us, at least until he can recover his losses or select a new strategy entirely." Nidaja broke in softly,

"The spirits of Silverlight had a similar plan, if you recall, snuffing small bases and causing him to have to micromanage his assets to slow him down." The general leaned forward a bit. She certainly had every right to interject in a meeting about strategy. "As I remember, it was neither economical nor efficient. Forcing a stalemate is only possible if we have similar strength. We do not." The white-furred male nodded to his lover and general.

"Right, so we cannot take the same course that we have been on until now. I have an issue of my own, a responsibility to the Asuna, that I have to take care of as well. This allowed me to ponder other options that we would never have considered before, but this has been a very dramatic change to take into account." Alps looked at Lyat, who nodded sagely. Even though Alps had adopted the Asuna into his plans for the future primarily because Empress Rios had forced him into siring a child for her, he was very adamant that Lyat's people had been abused long enough. Even if Rios did not now carry his child, he'd protect them. He would fight for them, and Nita had told him she was proud of him for it. The former slave continued, his convictions justified anew in his glance to the appreciative Lyat. "It is fortunate then that the best possible solution for the first problem lies in my conviction to solving the second. If we drove back or destroyed a large number of the avatar's army, it would not do us much good in the long run. He would have a bunch of new soldiers in short order because he works the Asuna to death in his nightmare mines and Uruk golem assembly lines. The first thing I shall do is allow Whale to explain something about how the Uruk work that no one this day in age knew or remembered." The white lupine male gave a nod to the black-furred one, who sat forward at the table a bit, looking uneasily at the bone. It seemed to really bother him. Alps was sure that it was because Mannus could see the glow of the essence around the weapon quite clearly. Alps had explained a little about it when they talked about the Nether, but this was actually the first time Whale had really been able to look at the thing. Breaking his distraction, he looked up and cleared his throat.

"Yes. It was not widely known even seven hundred years ago." Whale stated uneasily. He had not been able to talk to many people since he had been released from the crystal, and had not been able to leave the castle. He seemed a little awkward

talking at all. "Raise your hand if you know how the Uruk are controlled." He stated. Alps looked at the young-looking former warlord curiously. He stood up, hands on the table in his black robes with silver trim, long hair spilling down his back, and tendrils of it laying in front of his eyes occasionally. Vhale was a brilliant student before the war, so he seemed to better handle a meeting like a classroom, which was his only social experience before turning his back on the Letai. Misty raised her hand. Nita and Nidaja did as well. Alps and Luna, being a part of the planning process, obviously knew.

"Did Bone raise his hand? I can't tell." Nita stated. Nidaja chuckled at that. It was good to see her being a little light hearted, given how serious the matters at hand were. Misty spoke up.

"The crystals in their bodies, usually represented like glowing eyes, are imbued with the will of their maker, and are controlled remotely. The incredible power it must take to run entire armies all at once fighting on the battlefield is a testament to how immense the power of this 'Avatar' is." She seemed very dark in how she explained her understanding of this. It was perhaps to remind Nita that this was a very serious meeting.

"You are actually only part right." Vhale stated. Misty furrowed her brow. Being proved anything but entirely right was probably not something she was used to. He explained. "You see, the crystals take the commands of their master, but the Uruk are not mere puppets. They do not perform action by action. They have a set of instructions permanently written into them in silver and essence, a very unique use of crystal-smithing that I pioneered. Are you familiar with the art of crystal-smithing at all?" he asked. Misty held her head up proudly, seeming eager to redeem her wisdom.

"Certainly. Those who could use the essence to a high degree could take purified sands and forge them to crystal, and in the process create essence-charged seals in the crystal with silver dust. Those seals would allow the crystal to perform a simple task when activated by essence. Many Letai relics that you still find occasionally today were made this way. They can provide light, or create heat or fire, or even heal people... Some were even weapons near the end of the Letai's struggle. Many legends exist about common items with those crystals inside them. There is an entire black market reserved for supposed Letai relics based on mere supposition that a crystal exists within the item." Mannus nodded at the head of the High Council. He spoke up after she stated her knowledge.

"Correct. The Shadowfall crystals are made in exactly this way, but are obscenely more complex than a light or healing crystal, having hundreds of seals in dozens of layers inside them to make them work." Misty widened her eyes at actually learning of the level of complexity. "You see, it may seem like it, but controlling the Uruk has never been about a level of extreme power. It was never about me being that much more capable of using the essence than any other Letai. It's about how complex the crystals can be made, and just what they will do when they react to the energy provided. The Shadowfall crystals take a lot of power to activate because of what you are making

them do. You have to have far, far more power than one Letai is capable of on their own. You have to tap into the Nether and draw upon forbidden power, so that has little to do with one's own essence. However, the crystals used for the Uruk to give them life require only a little constant energy, but they still get that from the Nether which their crystals are lightly linked to, which means that they do not need someone providing them essence close by to function."

"So, the avatar is not pushing out his essence all the way across the continent?" Misty asked, gleaning clarification.

"Correct. From afar, he need only provide an instruction via the essence. Not a puppet string, merely a switch. This can be done over pretty vast distances. The crystals each Uruk has are extremely complex. The Shadowfall has a few hundred patterns in it to make it work, and relies on intense energy, but each crystal in an Uruk is just as complex, and can contain entirely different instructions to allow them to solve simple problems on their own. Navigating, defending, attacking, building, moving... Different patterns allow it to do different things. It gives it the illusion of responding to their master's intelligence. The more crystals an Uruk has, the wider the variety of things it can do, some even have the ability to use other essence crystals, like attack and defense techniques. These are beautifully complex golems that could very well be used for mining, tending fields, and building cities." Uri cut in.

"So wait... Why the fuck doesn't Mannus... I mean... the avatar... Why doesn't he just use the Uruk to mine for the crystals and build more Uruk? Why keep the Asuna around to do it?" Lyat looked a little pained at that, given the other option available to the avatar if he didn't need the Asuna for anything. Vhale answered.

"He doesn't need them to build the Uruk, this is true, however he thrives off of the suffering this slavery causes, both to the ones working themselves to death in the mines, and to their families who have to send their children to die in this horrible fashion. The fact that he has the Asuna doing it instead of other Uruk just gives him more Uruk to use to wage war and spread suffering to increase his power. Ultimately, if he wanted to, he could do without the Asuna at this point." Lyat sighed a bit at that. "However, there is one thing he cannot use the Uruk to do. It is something that he only does himself, I am sure, or leaves to those who he feels are the most loyal if such a thing exists. And this is where our opportunity lies." Nita and Nidaja perked up a bit.

"Opportunity?" Nita asked. "Well here is the part I wanted to know about the most!" Nidaja nodded to her sister. Alps resumed the explanation, garnering a relieved look from Vhale. He did not like public speaking, it seemed. Alps was learning to deal with it.

"The avatar can only send commands to the Uruk over a certain distance. It's based on the horizon. If you go too far, the command cannot "see" the Uruk, and they will not react. To counter this, there are special crystals set up in guarded locations. These are called whispering crystals. They take a message he provides, and they send

it to all the Uruk within range, and to other whispering crystals. These crystals are typically set up in high locations inside Uruk bases, very heavily guarded.” Nita and Nidaja listened as Alps explained. Vhale cut in briefly for clarity.

“I used to make the whispering crystals myself, and they are rather simple, but they do represent a challenge in dealing with the Uruk and their growing territory. The general idea is, one cannot send a request or a command to the Uruk beyond the range of the crystal. Let’s say there is a crystal at the front line, as far as the territory goes, and you send a bunch of Uruk out to the edge of its range. Then someone destroys the only whispering crystal that’s able to reach the Uruk. The Uruk’s crystals go dark and while it can defend itself when attacked, it won’t perform any other task. They are essentially harmless if you don’t provoke them. They can be disarmed carefully and dispatched afterwards with a bit of time. It’s not very hard.” Everyone at the table seemed to get the idea of where the plan was going at the same time.

“So, we intend to destroy a bunch of these Whispering Crystals to push back the front line and defend our lands from the Avatar.” Nidaja stated bluntly. “The Avatar will figure out what we are up to and bring death upon us very quickly I assume, and probably the Asuna too. Besides, to destroy a significant number of these bases, we would need a much larger army than we have, we would be unable to defend our border towns, which might immediately be attacked when we started our offensive, and we would lose hundreds or even thousands of lives in the process. It’s not a terrible choice; we just don’t have the capability.” Alps quietly listened to Nidaja, and nodded, smiling. The smile seemed to disarm her a bit.

“This is where the plan has a more clever shape.” The former slave leaned over the table a bit, standing, to look Nita and the others in the eyes. “Neit, our little burglar friend, was kind enough to provide us with information about someone who had firsthand knowledge of Uruk bases going deep into the avatar’s territory. Her knowledge of the current landscape was needed because it verified that a weakness that Vhale never resolved still exists.” The former warlord nodded at Alps’ statement in agreement.

“A weakness? *This* I want to hear.” Nidaja stated. She got confirmation of support in that from Misha and Uri. Alps unfolded a map that he had brought with him, and placed it unfurled on the table. He showed where Jalana was, on the coast, and drew a line east northeast across the map with his claw tip as he spoke.

“This takes us through the heart of our holdings in Amani territory, off to the northern edge of the Asuna territories, bordered along the north by steep, nearly impassable mountains. On the far eastern corridor of the Asuna territory, all that exists beyond are the ruins of the Letai homeland, the avatar’s territory. There is a half-ring of mountains, sheer cliffs almost completely impassable, except for right here.” Alps pointed to a small point where the mountains seemed to be pinched together. “Here, there is a narrow, but long and winding pass through the otherwise impossibly treacherous mountains. In this pass, there are two forts held by the Uruk, and two

Whispering Crystals. These were established pretty early in the war, when there was not even a fortress around the crystals. Vhale himself was posting the things to extend his control over the Uruk outward into Amani territory in his hunt for the fleeing Letai." The pass was not very clear on the map, but it was there. The general rubbed her chin softly as she considered this, seeming to struggle with herself on how good this news actually was. She finally spoke again.

"So if we took them out... The Uruk would just stand around doing nothing until he could replace those two crystals himself." she stated. "That is rather clever, and perhaps doable with a sizable force if we can push into his territory that far. It's risky, but I think it might be done, especially if the Asuna do not attack us because of Lyat's assistance. But that won't buy us much time, will it? He will attack and bring replacement Whispering Crystals, won't he?" The very realistic and tactical Nidaja had her counter argument ready as always. It was Vhale who spoke next.

"The first one will disable the Uruk that are in the second one, and all that are beyond it. All the Uruk everywhere beyond these mountains." he stated.

"So, what, we have another force go to each base once it's neutralized and attack it? Won't that take a while too? We still don't have enough warriors to pull it off. There are too many other crystals to have to take out once those two fall." Nidaja seemed a bit frustrated. She could see it was a wonderful idea, but there were too many risks and the task was too large for her army to accomplish fast enough.

"That would be one way, but you are right and we thought of that. Too much risk that it would not get done in time, and when signals started flying again, anyone near the Uruk would be killed." Vhale said. "So, Alps came up with a funny little trick, and I feel confident that I was able to design the right tool for the job perfectly. Luna had Ceriss make it..." Alps reached into his hip satchel and pulled out a long, slender blue crystal. It had countless layers of silver streaking through it.

"And what is that?" Nita asked.

"With the first tower, the one closest to the Avatar down, we will attack the second tower, the one filled at that time with Uruk still unable to act. We will clear it out, and once clear, replace the crystal in that fort with this one."

"What will that accomplish?" Nidaja asked.

"It will send out a single command to the Uruk that they must obey, since their master will be cut off from them and they will be unable to resist it." Alps rumbled, "... Find the Whispering Crystal in their fortress or base or tower, something they can see very plainly due to the high level of essence that it draws on, and destroy it. He can replace one or two bases quickly, perhaps in less than a month... but he cannot fix all of them in any semblance of time. It will give us plenty of time to dismantle his army and figure out a way to defend against him when he finally does find a suitable means of

attack.” There was a stunned silence at the meeting table. Alps smiled finally, realizing that even Nidaja was having trouble finding a fault with this plan. Luna had been ecstatic when it came together, even hugging Vhale. It was Nita, finally, who tried to find the chink in the armor.

“What if he just brings a massive army of everyone we didn’t dismantle, and attacks us all at once? I mean, he can fit a lot of Uruk in his own line of essence control, right?” the queen asked. Luna answered.

“We rather doubt that he has cause to keep many Uruk close to him. It’s a risk we have to take, but it is very likely that nearly all of the Uruk exist beyond the mountains. We will have destroyed nearly his entire army. Thousands and thousands of these relentless, awful golems... ended in a day.” She seemed to embrace that thought happily.

“And how long until he makes a new army using what’s left of his old one to do the work, and attacks us?” Nidaja asked. “I am sorry, but as a general, I have to...” she tried to apologize for sounding negative.

“Not at all, General, we welcome the concerns.” Luna crooned, smiling.

“He can’t use Uruk to make other Uruk.” Lyat said, uttering his first words of the official meeting.

“What?” Nidaja asked. The newly appointed black-furred slave replied to this one.

“He means that the Asuna put the Uruk together, and they mine the crystals or the sand for the crystals used in the Uruk, but they do not layer the instructions in the crystals. That cannot be done by Uruk, or by the Asuna.” Vhale sat up a bit, pushing his long hair out of his eyes. “He can make a new army, yes, but the crystals used for Uruk are very complex. His army is so huge because of how long he has had to build it, and the Uruk, when they properly maintain themselves, last for a century, maybe more. Some of the ingredients are harder to obtain than just digging them up and the process of layering the commands into the crystals takes time. He will not be able to make a massive fighting force quickly. This will provide us with valuable time to plan what to finally do about the avatar himself. We may not be able to destroy him, but we might at least be able to contain him. If this is the best we can do, it’s still better than the impending doom we are dealing with now.”

“I can live with that then. Luna, what do you think the chances are of pulling this plan off?” Nidaja asked. Alps looked to his mother, and she nodded to the general courteously, giving an approving smile. She answered softly,

“Significantly better than our chances if we continue to do nothing and just let him harvest our suffering until the strife caused by it makes us go to war with our own kind

and that wipes the rest of us out.” The priestess made sure to put a lot of weight in her words. She seemed rather certain that this was the only course the future could take if nothing was done. Nita nodded at this, agreeing with her. The weight of leadership had likely made her think of this many times before. Had Alps not intervened the way he did, the Spirits of Silverlight might well have been the start of a civil war exactly as Luna had feared. Alps could often see it in the queen’s eyes, the knowledge that ultimately, it would all end. Whether by the Uruk, or by the fear in her own people, it would end. It might not end in her lifetime, but her children or their children might well know the means of the final days of their people. Now, this was a chance to prevent that future from ever being known.

“So, who are we going to send on this dangerous task?” Nidaja asked. “I imagine a large enough force to be successful might attract the wrong kind of attention, especially since we are pushing right through the Asuna homeland on the north side here. We want to garner a lasting peace, not sudden suspicion. I volunteer to assist the task to ensure its success, but we all know the danger. Anyone who goes is taking nearly foolish risk. We should limit the numbers to only what is necessary.”

“I will go, of course.” Alps stated.

“Like hell you will.” Nita said bluntly.

“Nita...” her white-furred lover murmured sadly. “We cannot afford for this to fail. I have some abilities which might save the mission if we get into a bind...” he stated.

“Oh, by what, Shadowfalling yourself and any other survivors and hoping someone remains to take the crystal home?” the queen asked. “Hell no. Absolutely not. You seem to think that you can just prance off happy as can be to dangerous places, saving everyone along the way. You’ve been lucky, love, and that luck will run out. You will stay, others will go. It won’t necessarily fail without you.” There was an awkward silence from everyone present. Alps had not openly defied Nita before.

“I will be going.” Luna stated. “Nita, Alps feels rather strongly that this is something that he has to do. If he did not go, and the mission failed, and you lost Nidaja, and he lost me... would you look him in the eye and tell him it was not because he didn’t go? Will he ever believe that he could not have done a thing? It is for this very reason that I will take the risk myself. I won’t look back and wonder if my inaction cost those who needed me most their very existence.” Nita gritted her teeth tightly at that, seeming near tears with rage. Alps was a little shocked by how upset she was over that. She finally spoke, trembling a bit.

“Then I will go with him.” She said this with grim determination.

“Uh... No?” Misty said. “We can’t have you *and* Nidaja both go. There would be no one to hold the throne.”

"You have acted as my retainer in the past, Misty. What if my going is what saves them? Will I be able to look back and wonder the same thing as Luna has said? I cannot deny her logic. It would destroy him, but I cannot let him go and think that I lost him because I let him go. So if he is lost, so am I." The queen was still near tears. She really did fear losing him again, as had nearly happened a number of times now.

"This is not a very good idea. You are far too valuable a target on the road like that, your highness." Misty shook her head. "I would be remiss to agree to such a reckless thing.

"Then you shall be remiss." Nita crossed her arms. "I am going. I will see this through. My people would understand. It is for the sake of us all. Be it those in royal standing or those sitting in huts with dirt floors." The priestess spoke up softly.

"Your highness, I cannot express enough how dangerous this will be. Alps, if you had to choose between bringing her with us, and knowing that you might not be able to protect her if she goes, which would you choose?" Alps gazed at Nita a bit, and considered that. He wanted to be fair with this but his answer might upset his beloved. If he intended to risk himself for this fight, what right did he have to say that Nita could not? He would try to protect her, and might well die doing that, but he could not tell her that she was not allowed. Alternatively, he could opt not to go and she would not need to go either. But that would not be fair to those that he knew were depending on him. He mulled it over a little while and finally spoke.

"Nita, you will come with us if it is your desire, but I make no promise that I can protect you. I hate to say this, it pains me to say it, but the success of this venture is more important than all of our lives. If I have to make a decision where your very life is forfeit to ensure that we cut off the Uruk, I will do just that." The former slave hated to sound so cold, and it garnered some rather distressed looks from Misty and Luna, but Nita nodded in apparent understanding, before saying,

"This is agreed, as I would do for you, my love. It fills me with pride that your own needs, your longing to be by my side forever, will not cloud your judgment about what needs to be accomplished. Rather than upsetting me, this proves to me that Luna is right. You are the right person to go. But in that same regard, I believe I am too. So that is decided, who else is going?" she asked. There was a short pause as those gathered let that moment sink in. Nidaja answered.

"As I stated, I will go, Luna will go. Lyat will go." The large hyena broke in.

"Reika is also to be going... and Bone." There were worried glances cast to the Asuna.

"Reika? Is she up for something so ... detailed and critical?" Nidaja inquired hesitantly. She did not want to insult the hyena at the table who she had come to rather enjoy the company of by reminding him that his sister was not very stable. This task

required a lot of control and precision. It was Alps who answered instead.

“We can’t keep her from coming.” He said this rather flatly. “She won’t let us have all the fun without her. We’d be in more danger from her when we got back than we ever faced on the journey there, I promise.” Lyat raised an eyebrow to Alps.

“You is travelling long with my sister. I am maybe suspicious if you know her a little too well.” Alps looked back at the Asuna, and then his ears went scarlet at the possible implication. He had not intended it to sound like he was attracted to her. Especially not her. Then again, she knew his flavor, as she had sampled him before re-gifting his essence to her empress without his consent, so he could not state that nothing intimate at all had happened. Alps swallowed, unsure if Lyat was protective and might be sore with him for that.

“Ah... Yeah, I got to know her pretty well. I had her train me a little in fighting. If you can call the daily ass-kicking training.” He laughed a bit at that. There was a shrug from the hyena.

“Sister is being very sure that you is getting better and be good life-mate for Queen Razelle.” Alps looked away, off the hook for the moment, it seemed.

“We will also have a guest with us who knows more about surviving in the wilds beyond our borders than anyone else, or so we are told. Aris’ treasure-nicking friend Neit introduced to us to this contact. She seems to be the real deal though.” Luna pushed the conversation along. “An emerald lupine lady, she is actually a rather distant relation to the royal family, she tells us. I have my doubts on her direct blood relation, but she does appear to be quite reliable and very wise in the way of travel in less-than-safe circumstances.” Nidaja spoke up.

“Luna, will Ceriss be accompanying us?” The priestess looked back to the general and shook her head, looking a bit regretful.

“No.” Luna stated softly. “She will be staying here. Her abilities are not well suited to what we will be doing. She would serve better in assisting Misty. She fought hard in the war, and paid for it with 700 years of sad isolation. Her war is over. She’s done, I can assure you. She may gladly and fiercely defend the capital, but no running off into the jaws of the enemy. Apparently that’s how she went out, a quiet little mission that no one even knew about. I didn’t even know her back then, and was appointed as high priestess a few years after she was sent. I was never even made privy to the details of her mission, aside from being told that it was utterly futile.”

“Then these are all we are taking.” Nita said calmly. “Taking a large force does not ensure that we will succeed, it will draw far too much attention to what needs to be a quiet and precise operation.” Nidaja nodded to her sister. Alps, however, was fairly certain of one other who would be going with them. Ellis. She had not been to this meeting that he knew of, but he was sure that she was aware of the meeting, and was

aware of all that had been said at it, perhaps before it ever happened. She was spooky enough to him that the former slave had no problem believing that. Priestess Luna spoke again, in a rather hushed tone.

“The question to ask then is when do we leave? It should be soon, because every day that passes is another day that the enemy may learn that some of the Letai have escaped, and if that does not send him into a nightmarish rage, I don’t know what will.” Everyone nodded at that, obviously very sure that she was right. Nidaja raised her voice to give answer to that question.

“We will leave as soon as I have my supplies ready. Our guide to the outlands will be at a cottage in a little outlying town on the west side of the island, so we will be taking my boat from there.” The general leaned back in her chair as she spoke confidently. “We will need to arrive on the continent away from any towns or villages, and we will be avoiding them for the most part on our journey. I am sure the supplies that we will need will be rather limited, since we have a survivalist with us, but I motion to take as much as we can carry. It will slow us down at first, but by the time we arrive in the outlands, I suspect that even our survivalist friend will be happy that we brought them.”

There was little more to discuss concerning the coming task, and the dread everyone likely felt about it, but the group was content enough with the success of the meeting that they were glad to break for lunch. Matters of logistics were better left to Nidaja and Misty who were much more practiced in planning those kinds of things. Alps and Nita excused themselves and adjourned to the garden to get some fresh air. Lyat took Bone with him to reunite him with Reika. Luna went with Vhale to return him to his cell. Vhale’s temporary “home” had been nicely decorated so it was no less a room than most of the servants stayed in with the exception that it locked and that he was under guard. The guard was posted more to guard the secret of his presence in the castle than to prevent him from getting into mischief. Time alone with him had made both Alps and Luna rather confident he would not pose a real threat anymore.

Alps held Nita’s hand as they strolled through the garden together. There was a time not terribly long before that they would not have been seen holding hands together in a public locale. It had been too much a taboo for Nita, but she stopped caring about the taboo, and the reputation of her servant had become better known, his assistance in uniting the Spirits of Silverlight and the royal house was very much a talked about topic. There was little worry now about holding hands or even kissing and holding one another publicly. They were together, and would stay that way. This warmed Alps’ heart in ways that nothing could ever hope to deter. The white lupine looked at his queen and mate as the wind whipped through her hair. It was good to be with her again. She spoke, breaking the silence as her violet eyes peered into his.

“So, this time, I will get to travel with you on your little adventure. Are you really okay with that? It is dangerous you know. It’s no joke.” The queen’s lover nodded his head slowly to that.

“Indeed, no joke, but at least if we die we will be together. I know that you suffer when I am far away. The worry is not good for you. Truth be told, I am glad that you are going. I don’t like being away from you. I feared this last time that I could not come back.” He said, a lump forming in his throat.

“Because you had to Shadowfall yourself?” Nita asked. “That could not have been a nice choice to have to make. I am sorry that you had to even consider something so... reckless. I admit, I was pretty sore with you, but it was explained to me by Lyat that if you had not, it was a lot more than just your own life at risk. You did the right thing, and even if largely symbolic, since most of the Asuna have no idea you even exist, what you did was a very critical part of what will hopefully one day unite our people in friendship.” Alps thought for a bit as Nita talked. While having to cast himself into a possible oblivion was a hard decision, it was not what he was fretting about.

“I feared I would not be coming back long before I had to make that awful choice.” Nita listened to his words and stopped. She looked up at him curiously.

“You were going to stay in the Asuna lands because of Rios? You would have given up on being here with me because you feared I would be angry about the claiming of your bloodline?” the queen asked. She seemed genuinely hurt by the thought.

“No, certainly not.” Alps clarified, not wanting her to feel that Rios had trivialized her love for him. “I know what I am now, Nita. And especially learning who my mother is, I cannot run from it or deny it anymore.” He began walking with the queen again. She stepped along lightly beside him. She spoke up.

“What, Letai? We had suspected even before Nidaja switched her mind into you and ran off to crush Chana. It doesn’t change the fact that I want you here, Alps. In fact, I think it is wonderful that you are. It is proof to what we’ve known all along. You were meant for something greater than scraping dirt into a latrine in some border village, my love. You are the son of a Letai High Priestess. This does not change how we love one another and why, but don’t think I haven’t considered how much easier this makes things for me in my intent to take you as my life mate. The queen claiming a servant is something that might have been a tough chunk of hide for some to swallow, but the queen marrying the son of an authentic Letai High Priestess? That is the kind of thing that happens in legends, Alps. Our binding will serve to bolster hope and unity and happiness for the people. We cannot announce openly yet what you are, but it will eventually be known, especially if this task we intend to undertake actually works as planned. I don’t necessarily care that they would have frowned on our union before, but I won’t deny being delighted about what it will mean to them now. I would be silly to ignore it. It does not change what I feel for you, but it does change in a very positive way how welcome we will be to do it. Why would you have even paused in coming back if you suspected this?” Alps widened his eyes a bit at Nita’s feelings over the matter. She was very thorough in her explanation of those feelings and for that bit he could not get a word in over her. As she finally questioned his motives for staying away,

he spoke.

“It may bring happiness to the people, Nita, but at the time I had not known what we know now about Mannus, or the Uruk. They were an unstoppable and unthinkable force, and I knew that if it came out that I was Letai, and I was joined with the queen, the enemy would do everything he could to stop it. When I finally realized that I was Letai, when I could no longer deny it to myself, I had thought to stay away, to never come back because of the number of people that would die if I were there with you. I was sure that all my friends would stand and fight for me, and I was afraid to watch each and every one of them fall. And for what? Just to keep one person from dying? I could never let that happen.” Nita faltered a bit, and embraced Alps, who held her tightly in return. She murmured softly into his ear.

“That I have you now, and that I had you before, that you were delivered into my hands by my well-meaning sister, even though I had misgivings at first borne of fear of my own heart, I do not regret you, and even if I should die to protect you, I know that you would do nothing less for me, and for all in my kingdom. Alps, you do not have to run from what you are, and what we will be. It’s time you stopped being something that affects us and start being one of us. You are family now, and that means Luna is too. Our family will grow, whether by the gift of new life you ultimately provide for the royal house, or by those who love you and join us under one roof to stand against the darkness. Even Rios may be counted as family to the royal house at some point, and that may prove to be a greater boon for our future than you could have imagined, Alps. If all must end tomorrow, I am still glad that I had today.” Alps choked a bit, and then clutched Nita tighter as she held him in the garden.

It would be a long, difficult journey and it was possible that some of them might not even make it back, but the queen was right. It was a journey they had both decided to make together, and he would never again consider going it alone. He had his mate, his lovers, and friends. He was certain they would be with him no matter what, and that gave him strength that he felt he could face the Avatar himself with. One day, Alps thought, he might have to. And he would have his friends there at his side. He leaned back a fraction of distance and then forward again, parting his lips and cupping his muzzle to Nita’s own, kissing her deeply, heavily, and for a very long, smoldering while.

Sirius, Book IV

A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 2

It seemed like ages had passed since Alps was actually afraid to meet new people because it was always so brutally awkward. As a slave, one always had to be aware of how they addressed the other person, what they expected, being a good host, or following orders that you might find unfamiliar or difficult. Working under Chana had made meeting new people a frightening prospect, but with Nita he was subjected to a steady flow of people he had never met and often would never meet again. While originally he was asked simply not to speak, over time he was allowed to speak his mind, particularly if someone spoke to him first. Eventually, he was perfectly comfortable in social situations with his lover.

The lupine had learned these skills, but there was still some apprehension when meeting someone he knew he was going to be working with instead of just someone he might be expected to socialize with for a little bit and almost never see again. He had to build a good impression and establish his position in the working relationship early. The white former slave considered this now as they prepared to meet the one who would be their guide in the outlands, the areas beyond the border towns far east of Luca, his former home. They would not be passing it, however. They would not pass any place where there would be people who knew him, and they would avoid towns in general if at all possible. That was why they needed someone who was familiar with living without the need for additional supplies.

So, Alps waited with Nidaja and Nita on the dock, Nidaja's clipper ship loaded and ready to go. It had been a stroke of good fortune that their guest was already in the city of Diera when the decision was made that no one better could guide them. She had been there to give the city's library information that she had gathered about towns and places, ruins and other things out in the world beyond where most were willing to go. There were many ruins, and many secrets that had been lost under the weight of the sands of time. Alps expected to see a soldier, someone strong and hardy. He expected someone very much like Nidaja.

"You guys don't care about what's going on over your heads?" came a voice from above. Alps turned quickly and looked up and saw a darkened silhouette in the sun. The person was standing on top of a tall stack of crates, one of many stacks that lined the back side of the dock to be loaded onto or off of

the ships that came to port. It was hard to make out who was there; she was just a dark shadow in front of the sun. Alps reached to the hip pouch where he kept what was his only weapon, Ressaia.

"It's alright, Alps. That would be who we are waiting for." Nidaja said, probably recognizing the voice. Alps perked his ears and squinted, looking back into the light of the morning sun. She had gotten to the high ground and put the sun behind her. This made the white wolf think again that the person he was meeting was likely someone of Nidaja's stature and power. It made Alps feel a little better about the trip that he was about to go on. The form jumped down from the high boxes, a good fifteen feet to the ground and landed without a sound on black, soft suede leather boots.

Alps' eyes followed up her form to take in his new traveling companion. It was not at all what he was expecting. She was an Emerald Amanian, which Nidaja had expressed before, though her fur was even lighter greenish-silver than Nita's was. But, she was hardly Nidaja's stature. She was petite, a good head shorter than him, almost as short as Uri, but not so stocky. She had Nita's trim and noble physique. Her outfit certainly looked different from what Nita's lover expected. She wore a violet and gold dress that cinched around her midriff with a gold belt, and came down to just above her knee. She had leather wrappings above her boot to protect her legs a little more, and also wore a deep red velvet-lined cape, making her look more like royalty than Nita did, standing there in a simple blue traveler's robe. Alps looked up into her violet eyes, as was typical for what the Asuna called "ferns", the Emerald Amanian tribe.

She had an unusual marking around her right eye, though. The fur there from her brow to her cheek, around the eye itself, was solid white, as if someone had dyed it. Alps could tell it was the actual color of her fur there, however. Her hair was long, spilling down her back over the cape as she rested her hand on the hilt of an ornate long sword similar to Nidaja's, held in a black, unadorned scabbard. Alps looked back and forth between this diminutive, flashy creature, and Nita. His life-mate-to-be handled the introduction.

"Alps, this is a friend of the family, Lira Sanreail. Lira, this is Alps, someone who has made himself most... valuable to the Amanian Empire. He is the one I will draw into the Razelle family line." She said this so proudly that Alps had to blush at it. It still seemed hardly a plausible reality.

"I had heard about a white-furred slave that has made something of a name for himself in the city of Diera. And there are some very strange rumors about an attempt upon him with a failed Shadowfall Spell. Very interesting indeed..." She peered at Alps, seeming to be not as harsh as she was just casually curious. The lady seemed a bit laid back and calm to be the one they were depending on in a harsh, untamed wilderness. The white wolf was expecting someone a little harder to match.

“Yes, there are those rumors.” Nidaja answered, looking around with some obvious secrecy. This made Lira look around as well, and hush her tone.

“That you do not refute them and now show need for my softer tones speaks more words than you dare betray aloud, cousin.” Lira grinned at Alps, looking suddenly as if she were eying treasure. The male made a note that she sounded even more scholarly than Misty, carrying a little of the same ornate accent that the councilor did. “... This may turn out to be a very strange trip then. I am glad of it.” Nidaja cleared her throat, getting the girl’s attention.

“This is not entirely as it seems, but we will be well off shore by the time you are fully brought to current with information. We won’t make you go into this blindly, but we won’t say more here. We should get onto the boat and get underway, if all your things are in order. We are traveling with reduced crew, just Misha and Uri, myself, Nita, Alps, and a few guests. Once we reach the coast of Amani, Misha and Uri will be sailing back to Diera without us, so whatever you are bringing is all you take with you.” Lira nodded and reached behind one of the crates and picked up a rather heavy-looking duffel bag. She was, at least, stronger than her petite form made her appear. Alps moved up the gangplank to the ship, and stood by the ship’s helm, where Misha was adjusting some straps, and tightening the steering. Soon, they would be underway.

Lira got on board the ship with Nita and Nidaja, who came up behind her, and the gangplank was removed by Uri and Nidaja. Both the general and Uri wore black leather armor, while Misha wore a uniform similar to Alps’ black and gold one, though her trim was red, showing her to be part of the Royal Guard. The activities on the ship were hurried and a bit out of Alps’ general understanding. He knew the basics of what it took to work the sails and the rudder, but he never really understood exactly how it worked, so watching Uri and Misha handle the ship on their own was no different than watching Nita work Essence Magic. At least Nita’s abilities were starting to make more sense to him, even if the essence didn’t seem to want to behave as much in his hands as it did in hers. Lira tried to help a little with this and that, pulling and hoisting, tying and striking. It was just enough to not look as utterly useless on deck as Alps did. Nita held his hand to make him at least look like he was fulfilling his personal requirements to her, and that made the former slave feel better.

After the ship was headed in the right direction, very little else seemed to be needed. They used a compass to make sure their heading was not straying too much, and took the boat out of the large southern harbor, into the open sea, and then slowly pulled her to the east, sailing toward the rising sun. After about an hour of just holding Nita and watching their home of Diera shrink away behind them, they could not make out the harbor entrance anymore, it was just a mountainous little strip of land far in the distance.

As the ship sailed, Nidaja explained to Alps a bit more about Lira, who busied herself getting some things moved around deck and secured. The girl's parents had served Nita's mother Arcana during her reign, and they were sent into the wilds to find relics in Letai ruins, or even in Amanian ruins, secrets that might turn the tide against Mannus. She was not happy with merely surviving; she wanted to remove the specter of death that was hanging over their fragile society. She felt that the Letai were wiped out so aggressively because they knew how to defeat him, and that those secrets might have been left behind for others to find. It was for this reason that Nita's mother, the former queen, had been cast into the Shadowfall. Lira's own parents never came back from one of their outings, and were assumed to have run out of good fortune. Lira had already been trained in the art of survival, silent travel and Letai Lore before this happened, and carried on the family business of ruin exploring and searching for secrets in the outlands. She had become a particularly good friend to Misty, who made sure that the girl's explorations were well funded, even if not publicly supported by the royal house. She did not want a similar fate for Nita that Arcana had suffered.

With the explanation out of the way, and the island of Diera slipping far behind them, Nidaja moved over to the stairs that lead down to the ship's cabin. As she arrived there, Lyat and Reika padded out onto the deck, perhaps quietly summoned by Nidaja. They did not want the Asuna pair to be seen in the city randomly, even with an escort if possible. They knew the rumors were flying, and being seen right there with the royal family would not have helped matters.

"Wait, what?" came Lira's expected question as she backed up a bit, looking stunned at the hyena duo, but not actually afraid. Alps had secretly expected her to be ready to attack them, but she made no motion to her sword. She took a moment to look them both over, instead, very carefully inspecting them, not saying a word for a bit.

Lyat wore a white shirt which billowed a bit in the breeze, tied low in the front which left his chest showing. Alps figured that was at present from Nidaja, given the long, hard look she took at him. He had on black trousers tied at the ankles, and black shoes, which made him look less wild than Alps had seen him originally. He looked less out of place in his new clothing. Both of the hyenas, grey with charcoal points and speckled with charcoal spots, looked clean and fresh.

Reika looked a little more typical to Reika, wearing a leather plated skirt similar to what Nidaja had with her armor, though it was light tan instead of black, and a bit shorter. She had on a grey-colored shirt which had no sleeves and showed bare hyena midriff. It seemed like the kind of thing that was supposed to be worn under something else, but the hyena girl likely got too hot below deck during the day and took it off, and had no presence of mind to put it back on. Of course, she had Bone with her, and Bone had a new "outfit" as well. The leather

wrapping around his handle has been changed with dark blue dyed leather. Alps made a mental note to bolster Reika's happiness by complimenting Bone's new look.

"Is being so good to be out of hot under deck place." Reika rumbled. "We can move around up here now, yes?" the hyena female asked, wide, curious eyes regarding Nita. The queen nodded.

"Okay, so there is this rumor that I had discounted as complete lunacy, but that's true too?" Lira asked. Lyat looked to her and bowed.

"Lyat. Is most pleasing to meet you. We will be in your traveling from here." He was getting a bit better with common speech, but his attempt to sound more eloquent perhaps missed the mark.

"You is meeting also Reika!" the lady hyena barked, waving. "And Bone!" she held up the painted weapon. Lira looked blankly at the club, and smiled at Lyat, murmuring,

"Ignamur ayl forunevandun tanock yuruldrun kumigna'nordun." Lyat widened his eyes and then grinned bright.

"Without even accent. Well done, you talking Asuna better than Asuna are talking Amani." Reika applauded, nodding. Lira looked warily at Nita and Nidaja, as if trying to judge what the hyenas were doing traveling with them. She murmured,

"Are they to accompany us freely, or are they ordered?" the guide asked. Alps folded back his ears. He forgot easily how most Amanians regarded the Asuna.

"It would have been impossible to keep them from coming with us." Nita stated, reliving the suspicion that the pair was forced into compliance. "They come freely. They are envoys sent by Empress Dominis herself, to represent the Asuna in good faith."

"And gladly." Lyat stated for clarity.

"This pleases me." Lira stated flatly. "Obviously, since I speak their language, you may assume I am regarded favorably by the Asuna." She stated. "I had feared our people were being pushed closer and closer to war." She added the weight of intense concern on that last part. Nidaja smiled and moved over to Lyat, making a very obvious show of leaning up and kissing him. Alps wagged a bit, glad to see it. It was a very clear way to show that the idea of war with the Asuna was not a priority to the general. "Oh dear." Lira blinked at that.

"I can assure you, that's not going to happen." Nita said, as if the kiss hadn't made it clear. Reika bounced a bit on her heels.

"Yes yes! All friends now! Love and happiness. Uri wolf kisses Bone." She held out the decorated club to Uri, who leaned back almost outside of her physical capacity to do so, teeth gritted with dead. She was not kissing Bone. Reika laughed. "It's okay, Bone, girls is shy on long trips, she likes you!" Uri slipped behind her taller lover, Misha, shaking her head. Alps wondered how much teasing had been going on before he got there.

This is a great relief to me. You have no idea how much help the Asuna are capable of being when they are treated with dignity. I believe that our people may have been intentionally pitted against one another by Mannus." Lira was, of course, kind of on the mark, except for the little detail at the end. This seemed to remind Nidaja and she murmured,

"We do have two more folks for you to meet..." She called down below deck where Lyat and Reika had emerged. "Luna, it's alright... You can come up now." She said loudly. Alps looked back over to the stairs. They were far enough away from Diera that their secrets could be revealed to Lira. Alps stood by Nita, and watched as Luna came out of the below-deck area, shielding her eyes from the sun a bit, dressed in her usual lovely green robes. The solid white lady wolf bowed pleasantly to Lira. Behind her emerged the black-furred Vhale, his hands innocuously behind him as he nodded politely. Lira spoke up in greeting.

"Hello there. I'm Lira. I will be guiding you hopefully to the fruitful completion of whatever... it is... that you are doing, wait, there's two solid white wolves in one place?" she asked, openly pointing to Luna. "What are the odds of that?" she asked.

"Not bad, given certain new information." Uri barked helpfully. Alps smiled at that, but mostly because of how Luna smiled.

"Allow me to introduce you properly." Nidaja stated, standing by Luna. "Lira, this is High Priestess Luna." The priestess kindly and elegantly bowed again in greeting to the shorter green-furred female. She looked perplexed.

"High Priestess?" she asked. "Ah, so we have those still who are unafraid to bring back the Letai teachings, willing to stand in stark defiance of Mannus' unwritten laws. I could see the need for secrecy. It's as forbidden as you get." She took Luna's hand and held it fondly. "I admire your courage." Nidaja grinned a bit sinfully. Lira looked at her "cousin" with a bit of apprehension. "Am I missing something?" she asked.

“Remember the rumor you spoke of that I was mum about?” Nidaja inquired. Lira nodded.

“Of course, so since we are on our way, you can share that with me, right? Did a Shadowfall crystal actually fail? Is Nita’s betrothed now the only who has seen the other side and somehow slipped out?” Lira looked with great interest at the white male, who kind of shank back beside Nita. He hated being treated like he was special, even if he had at least that one feat to his name not once, but three times now.

“The crystal did not fail, Lira.” Nita said calmly. “Alps forced his way out and shattered it. The Shadowfall has been broken.” Lira’s eyes widened and she snapped her attention back to Alps, who looked away, not interested in seeing an awed expression. He just wanted to come home. It was not so great as all that. His desperation provided the way, and the power he unknowingly tapped at that time was dangerous, so he was not especially proud of what his seemingly only essence ability happened to be. When he looked away, he saw that Vhale looked a bit uncomfortable too. Alps knew that Vhale was a little disquieted by the white former slave’s ability too.

“How did he force his way out? Is he part of our line?” she asked, referring to being an Emerald Amanian. She was asking if he could control the essence the way the Emerald tribe could. “I guess if you chose him as a life mate, he would kind of need to be, huh?” she asked. Nita smirked a bit.

“No, he’s not, but he does have control of the essence. I have a little more important news than even that to impart upon you, dear Lira.” Nidaja said, grinning. She seemed to be taking great pleasure in that reveal.

“Stop with the baiting and let me know already, you know I am curious. You know how insatiable that side of me can be, it had better not be small for how you play this up.” She laughed a bit to show she was being good natured about it.

“You see, when Alps forced his way back from the Shadowfall, he did not come back empty-handed.” The general explained slowly.

“Oh my heavens, a Relic!” piped Lira. “He’s brought back a powerful relic, please let me see!” she barked, looking around as if it might just be sitting on the deck and she had not noticed it.

“Oh, I think I am still a bit young to get called a relic.” Luna proclaimed, smiling warmly at the green-furred lady wolf. Her eyes widened. She leaned back, rump against the railing of the ship, hands clamping it to stabilize herself.

"Wait... You mean he pulled someone else who had been Shadowfallen... out with him?" she asked, her eyes much wider now. Nidaja nodded. Lira looked back at Luna. "How long were you... in the crystal?" she asked, seeming to be fearful of coming out and asking her real question. It was too silly to even entertain... Too impossible.

"Seven hundred years, I am told." The priestess smiled again, seeming calm and serene, in stark contrast to Lira, who suddenly cupped her muzzle, looking near paralyzed with shock.

"Oh... Oh my... You don't just... You are actually... A..." Lira's hands began to shake.

"She's the real deal, lady." Uri said, wagging. "A full-blooded Letai Priestess." Lira inhaled deeply, shaking her hands a little, as if trying to get blood flowing normally again. She looked away, composing herself a moment. Alps felt kind of bad that Nidaja was playing for her reaction, but it was rather interesting to watch. It seemed obvious that she was as interested in the Letai as Misty was, so this was a big deal to her.

"So... wait... How did Alps get the ability to do that? It doesn't seem like something one could do with even my control of the essence." Lira asked, breathing faster now, exasperated.

"He gained it somehow the first time he went into the Shadowfall, when he was a kid." Nidaja explained. Alps looked back to Vhale, who looked out over the ocean, obviously avoiding that part of the conversation altogether. Alps felt a little pang of guilt that it would likely be brought up from time to time, as it was what Vhale considered to be his most vile act.

"He was Shadowfallen when he was a kid? How long did it take him to get out?" she asked.

"Seven hundred years." Luna stated flatly. "He was sent the very same day I was." Lira looked at the pair.

"They're related." she observed openly, before widening her eyes again. "He's Letai too, are you serious? You had a Letai *slave* and you let him get Shadowfallen?" she asked accusingly. Nita chuckled at that.

"I didn't know he was anything so unusual back then, it was discovered after he escaped with his mother." Nita stated, nodding to the proudly beaming Luna. This also verified the relation of the two white wolves. "The plot thickens, however!" the queen said dramatically. Alps noted carefully that his lover did not explain that Alps brought back more than one priestess, or mention anything about Ellis. He suspected that the guide was only being told what she really

needed to know. She was being told who the main actors in all this were. Lira fanned herself, and rumbled,

“Do tell...” and leaned back against the railing again, just in case she could not handle the news. “You are not messing with my head though? This is all for real? Please don’t play weird games.” She shook her head a little, already realizing by the expressions on Nita and Nidaja’s face that they were not. Lyat and Reika knew all of this already, and had started to explore the upper deck of the chip together. Alps quirked his brow as Reika chewed on the anchor chain in curiosity. Lyat seemed to be telling her to behave.

“No, no game. This is the real thing.” Nita offered, “You see, events took Alps and Nidaja to the Asuna capital city, where Empress Dominis had stolen Alps for personal reasons.” Alps was actually kind of relieved that Nita did not explain exactly what he was needed for. “While he and Nidaja were there, the city was besieged by an Uruk army, looking for the general and the unusual white slave she had been with, perhaps to prove that the Asuna were not being faithful to their promise. Rumors of Alps’ escape from the Shadowfall might also have reached the dark domain. Collaborating with the Amanians is as much a forced taboo to them as teaching the ways of the Letai is forced out of us. You can imagine the two of them being found alive in the capital would have been disastrous to everyone there, so Alps had to do something a little... extreme.” She noted.

“More extreme than forcing his way out of a Shadowfall Crystal?” Lira asked incredulously.

“Yeah, he forced his way back into one with Nidaja, to escape.” Nita explained.

“What.” Lira’s reply was flat. Nita continued to explain.

“In the domain of the Asuna, Alps learned more about using the essence, as he was learning what exactly he was. He learned the ability, and put them both into the Shadowfall. The Asuna brought the crystal back to Diera, where he popped out of it again.”

“Wait, he can go in and out... of his own free will? Nidaja has also been in the Shadowfall and lived to tell about it?” Lira seemed to understand the scope of that quite well.

“Yes, but with me, he also brought back another guest, the guy you see there.” Nidaja said softly.

“Hi.” She looked at the somewhat sad-looking lupine, resting in his black and silver robes against the mast.

"I'm Vhale." He said with a distant look. It was obvious he intentionally omitted his last name. Nidaja didn't press it. It did not seem to trouble Lira.

"He knew some things that helped us formulate a plan to push back the Uruk, and reclaim our lands." Alps said, finally taking a moment to talk now that the story had steered away from making him talk about himself. Lira nodded at this and regarded the group on deck for a moment, before speaking again.

"I... see. Well, I suppose that I was right. This will be an interesting journey. The most interesting that I have ever been on." She paced a bit. "The queen of Amani and her top general, an actual Letai High Priestess who has been released from the Shadowfall by a slave who is, himself, Letai... Another Letai male who will help take back our lands... Two Asuna envoys from the Empress... Am I missing anything?" she asked.

"Probably the fox." Alps half-whispered.

"What?" Lira asked, blinking.

"Nothing." Alps said, shaking his head. He had no proof that Ellis was on the ship, but he didn't really need it. He knew she would be there. Lira looked at Alps for a little longer and then back out over the ocean.

"Okay, so now that you have given up more secrets than I could possibly make anyone believe even if I did tell them, what is it we will be doing?" the lady guide asked.

"We will be pushing deep into dark territory and attacking two Uruk bases deep in the heart of those areas. We cannot fail this." Nidaja explained.

"I'll just be getting out here." Lira stated, motioning that she would be going overboard.

"You are welcome not to come if you do not wish to, and we certainly are not going to force you to fight or attack those bases with us." Nita stated. "But we need a guide to get to where we are going, and hoped we could have the best. This mission, as Nidaja said, cannot fail."

"This is insanity. You would need an army." Lira said with a stony face.

"We have a Letai Priestess and an Asuna with a bone club." Nita said with a positive tone. Alps could hardly tell if it was optimism or sarcasm, though, so he chimed in himself.

"I'm actually feeling pretty good about this." He grinned to the hesitant potential guide. Lira looked back and forth between each of the group, and sighed.

"Fine... Someone's gonna have to come back so everyone at least knows what happened to you." She sat on a crate and looked up at the male hyena.

"And you are sure you aren't being forced?" she asked.

"Lyat would not miss this for entire treasure of Asuna people." He grinned. Lira shook her head, rubbing her temples and sighing.

"I must be the craziest one of us for agreeing to this... but... Damn it... I'm in."

The lamplight flickered softly in the sandstone-lined luxurious room. Freshly remodeled, this had become Misty's favorite room in the castle. It was part of the library to be used as a study. It was carpeted, bright, warm, and had tables and plush reading chairs spaced attractively throughout. Nita had it remodeled because she expected that when she started a family Misty could help her child pursue the very finest education. For now however, it was Misty's to use. In the many days leading up to the departure of the queen on a quest the councilor was loathe to allow, she had shared this beautiful tan-colored fire-lit study with a mysterious guest. The fox, Ellis, had spent more time than Misty could even fathom with her nose in books the entire time after the Asuna brought Alps' crystal back. The same day Alps left again, the fox was missing as well. There had not been an agreement for her to go, but Misty suspected she went nonetheless. She was very odd.

Still, it was nice to have the place to her self, but she regretted not spending more time with Alps before he left. Particularly to satisfy her cravings that had gone largely unanswered for some time. Still, she was very involved in all her work leading up to taking stewardship of the throne until Nita returned, and perpetuating the story that Nita and Nidaja had taken vacation because the general was so often away from home and was sorely missed. This was not unusual, given the stress that the queen was often placed under. Some bonding time with her family was certainly understandable. Misty, clad in her dark blue silken robes, round spectacles perched on her muzzle, read a book that Lyat had brought for her. It was one of the history texts for the Asuna. She had found it incredibly interesting because it gave a lot of insight into the culture that the Amanians might soon find themselves in an awkward alliance with.

The emphasis on personal honor in Asuna society pleased Misty, who found this to be a very easy concept to share with them, and encourage them to see in the Amani as well. The thought of an alliance, unsteady or otherwise with the Asuna had never really held much weight with Misty, as she had never known any Asuna, and the general understanding was that they had no real interest in getting to know the Amani. They just enjoyed burning down their towns and cities. This, Misty learned, was forced.

She stretched a bit, trying to decide if she needed to head to bed or not. Tomorrow the governing body would rest, and she would not be expected to take the throne. Even royalty was allowed a day to rest, and other members of the high council could very well share the task of running things with Nita gone if Misty needed a break, but tomorrow would be a break for everyone not tied in to special emergency services. Misty sighed and decided that if she went back to reading this interesting text, she might not sleep at all. She wished that she had Alps around for distraction. She slept so well any night that she had him. Was it wrong for her to feel for him the way she did? Nita didn't seem to mind it, and she didn't require him often, but it had been so long.

She got up and stretched a bit, looking around the study. The bookshelves were neatly stocked with the tomes that Misty was studying at that time, and with a few that the black fox had been studying. It was a lovely and peaceful place where no one ever disturbed her. The door opened. Misty narrowed her eyes. Alright, almost no one ever disturbed her. The councilor looked up.

In the doorway was a guard, wearing the black uniform with red trim, as well as some chain mail and a red sash. He had grey fur, with a darker grey, almost black patch on the top of his head, and coaly black on his ears. He seemed fairly mature, which was reassuring, as the trend of guards offered to the royal house had become either too old to fight on the front lines, or too young to have the experience to do so, which left Misty feeling a little vulnerable. This one looked like he knew what he was doing at least. She had not seen him before, however. He paused, realizing that he had walked into an occupied room.

"Oh. Pardon me, I am a bit new, I was told this wing was unoccupied at this hour." The guard bowed courteously. Misty leaned back against the edge of the study table, looking over to him.

"It's alright. I'm Misty Metsuko." she offered with a nod.

"Oh!" the guard chimed brightly. "I recognize you then, you are to tend the throne while the Lady is away? Captain Lunaris told me about you. You are up late studying then? Nice library. I could lose myself here." The councilor looked at the guard again. He seemed a little younger than her, though perhaps not

much. She scolded herself as she felt sudden fondness for his company creep over her. It was because she was missing Alps' company and she knew it. But he seemed energetic and strong, and he had to pass rigorous tests of trust and dependability to become a castle guard. The gold-furred wolf shook her head a bit, and murmured,

"You are new to the castle, or are you new to Diera? Did they transfer you?" she always liked to know where folks were from.

"I transferred from Kishu Valley in the spring to Jalana, and a month ago to here. I didn't think I would actually get selected to work here. I had been told that it was really difficult to get, and Lunaris can be a very stern captain, but I am glad to get the chance. I am sorry I didn't get to meet the queen, but I hope to still be here when she gets back." Misty smiled a bit, wagging her tail. He was social. That did make her feel a little bit better. She rarely took the time for a personal, one on one talk, and he wasn't shy about talking to her even though she held power. She ran into that a lot, but this one was a bit bolder about speaking.

"You said you could lose yourself in here... you like to read?" the lady wolf asked. The guard nodded emphatically.

"I did all the time when I was younger, but not so much now. I loved stories about traveling over the sea, and the Lhap islands, the lean fox folks... those were interesting stories. I started to get into history and legend a bit when I was getting older, but the army doesn't offer much in the way of a library." He laughed. Misty grinned demurely.

"When you are not otherwise occupied with your duties, I do not mind at all if you use the library here, but please leave things exactly as you found them. You would not enjoy my company if I encountered poorly arranged volumes in my library. What's your name?" she asked, relaxing a bit and feeling a bit happier for his conversation.

"Leal, milady. It is good to meet you. Thank you, I shall certainly take you up on that offer, and will leave everything exactly as it is. I am sorry if I interrupted your studies. I should come here a bit later in my rounds then?" he asked. Misty shook her head.

"Oh goodness no, I don't consider a guard's rounds as an interruption, it's reassuring. Think nothing of it. I am happy to talk to those I work with here too, so if I am feeling conversational, I would certainly not bemoan your occasional distraction, Leal. It's nice to have someone more conversational on the rounds to be honest. Most take to heart Lunaris' instructions to be as quiet as they possibly can, sneaking about in an uncomfortably spooky fashion. You are

actually approachable, which tells me that you are probably doing it wrong.” Misty and Leal both laughed, the councilor finding it refreshing to do so.

“I would not mind at all talking with you more. Intelligent conversation is sadly not the kind of thing you get much of in the rank and file of the army. Being sent here was a worrisome change for me, but I suspect it might well turn into a boon.” He wagged his black-tipped tail slowly. Misty smiled as she watched her, and then gritted her teeth a bit, her mind wandering to activities that would certainly delay the poor guard’s rounds. Sure, she had every right and privilege to delay him as she saw fit, and Lunariss would not argue his duties if he were with Misty, no matter how unimportant her tasks or intentions, but her use of that time was something she was shocked that she could even consider. She really did miss Alps, and she missed her chance to enjoy him and would not have him with her again for possibly months, even if everything worked out perfectly well. It weighed heavily on her mind to think that they might all be in danger and that made her crave company to keep her mind off of it all the more. Leal bowed to her pleasantly, perhaps perceptive of the awkward pause as Misty struggled with her thoughts and desires. “I shall allow you to return to your studies if you wish, milady. I do not wish to prevent what I am sure is very important work if you are up so late.” Misty looked up again, furrowing her brow. He was very mature and polite, not unlike a white-furred former slave. He turned to depart.

“Wait.” Misty blurted out and then looked away, feeling silly. What was she even thinking? She looked down at her feet, feeling as completely stupid and ignorant as she had when she was giving Alps his first checkup in Jalana, uncertain of herself, what she was doing, or how it would go. Her heart hammered. He would be mortified if she asked him for such a personal favor. He had just met her! Then again, she had not to long known Alps before they...

“Yes, Lady Metsuko?” asked Leal, wagging his tail slowly, attentive to her instructions. Misty looked up into his eyes a moment, tense, anxious.

“To be in the army, you offer your very life to the royal house... I could ask you to run to your certain death, and you would have to do that. Do you regret giving others this power over you? Do you fear it would be squandered and your life forfeit cheaply?” Misty blinked a bit at her own question, feeling as if she didn’t even know where she was trying to go with it, even if she did know where she wanted this conversation to go.

“I suppose everyone worries about dying, but it’s not those who make the decisions about my life that I joined for. It’s all those who can’t make that choice.” Misty widened her eyes a bit. It was a rather sage answer.

“You will do anything asked and not question it, for the good of those you protect and care for?” Misty asked.

“Indeed. It’s even part of the oath, though I am sure you know that.” He replied. Misty inhaled deeply, and swallowed, her heart pounding, fingers feeling numb as she fought with what she was actually doing. She felt so fearful, and for what? She looked away, a little ashamed of herself, but she yearned so much. The feeling of a lover held close was addictive. She wanted so much just to push her body against another and feel reassured and wanted.

“I want you to do something for me. If you do not wish to, I understand, and will not request further, but it’s a bit unusual, and I would demand that you hold it in highest confidence, Leal, even my asking. Can I have your word?” Misty’s stomach sank, and she felt almost panicked. This was so incredibly bold and so luridly depraved of her. But she could not stop herself.

“Sure, you have had my complete loyalty for silence or otherwise since I came through the door.” The helpful and appealing guard stated. He was making it so much harder to resist what she could no longer prevent. Misty moved over to the door that Leal was standing near, and moved her hand to it, feeling almost as if someone else was moving her hand for her.

“click.”

The door locked. She looked up a bit, closing her eyes, trying to steel up her courage. How would she ask it? ‘Please let me have sex with you, I need it..’ That sounded desperate and dirty. ‘I am used to the love of another, and miss his touch, please satisfy my longing.’ That sounded even worse, it made her seem cheap and devalued Leal. Her heart hammered harder. This was a terrible idea, she would feel so stupid if he was not interested or said no. Maybe he even had a mate already in the city, he was handsome.

“Are you okay? I assure you I will honor you, milady.” Leal said softly. He seemed concerned at the councilor’s pause.

“I’m lonely. I need your company.” Misty said it without thinking. She felt immediately stupid for it. It was the worst way to ask for it. She sounded weak.

“As I said, I will always be happy to render that, it’s more pleasant than most any other duty a guard can have.” He explained. Misty looked back to him, her eyes ravenously hungry. He widened his eyes a little, and the lady wolf was sure she saw realization sweep over his face. She couldn’t talk anymore. Everything she said sounded so stupid. She moved forward, taking his hands into hers, and she just closed her eyes and pushed her muzzle to his own. Their mouths cupped one another and her tongue pushed feverishly into his maw, his back thumping up against the door.

This was it, she thought. He’d struggle, gasp, and writhing pull away, and inform her that he had misgivings or worse. He would inform her that those

charged with the castle's protection had to focus on their duties, and he would not risk losing his hard-to-get status with this task that was in no way part of his duty. Her mind was spinning but she could not pull her tongue from his mouth, and could not move her body away from him. Then, as her blood rang in her ears, she felt his hands leave hers. She suspected he would push her away, but they laced around her, slipping up her back, and stroking her through her silky robes. Her ears flattened and she whimpered softly in utter happiness, her tail whipping back and forth for a bit behind her. He wasn't pushing her away, he was embracing her. Would he regret it? Would he do it once and not visit again? She felt a burning lust rapidly overcome her entire quivering body that told her that, for the next thirty minutes to an hour that was the last thing she was going to care about. Her body called upon him, and his body seemed to, for now, answer.

Misty stopped thinking about whether it was right or wrong, her mind switching instead to how she could forgive herself, and even those thoughts faded as she felt his tongue push back against her own. She inhaled sharply through her nose as he pulled her to the side, and pushed her back against the wall so they were not against the door, the guard now the aggressor in this sudden, unplanned affection. Misty whimpered with joy. She wasn't taking it, he was giving it. She felt wanted again. How wonderful the memories that raced through her mind, and yet, she did not feel the way she had been afraid she would. She wasn't thinking solely of Alps and wishing it were him satisfying some addiction, she was excited for the young male guard that she had gained the intense attention of.

The councilor felt less and less sorry for herself as his hands slipped over her shoulders and caressed her cheek, slipping through her long hair, and holding against the wall as he kept her close, his mouth parting to pant softly. Misty took advantage of his panting to speak, hoping that something intelligent would finally come out.

"You can still stop this... if you don't want me to..." Misty bit her tongue. Mixed signals were not at all intelligent. The guard arched his back a bit in his heavy chain mail hauberk. He looked into Misty's emerald green eyes and murmured,

"I'm not sure... either of us can stop this now..." He slipped his hands into Misty's own, and pulled them over her head, kissing her deeply, pushing his body against hers to push her against the light-colored sandstone wall. The way those words flowed off Leal's tongue before that passionate, fiery kiss struck the too-long untended Misty deep, and she tensed as she felt her honey actually roll down her inner thigh, already absolutely shamefully wet for her near stranger of a lover. Misty swallowed loudly around Leal's tongue, drawing in his moisture, kissing back with a starvation for any contact with him, shocked at herself, and at the truth he spoke. She didn't think she could stop, even if she thought he might

not want it. Misty felt her legs wobble a bit. She was having trouble standing, even pushed against the wall.

That was okay. She didn't want to stand anymore. The moment he broke the kiss to rub his cheek sweetly to her own, she just let herself slide down the wall, her hands slipping forward and dragging down his tummy, feeling the cool, textured chain mail slide under her fingertips before she found the sash of his trousers. He let go of his lover's hands and put his own against the wall, leaning forward a bit as he looked heatedly down at the top of Misty's head as she pushed her nose under the chain mail, kissing at his tummy through the black dress shirt that the guards all had to wear. The councilor found herself on her knees, thighs spread wide to let her nose trail low over his tummy before him with her back against the wall. She looked up at him over the top of her spectacles. She wondered what he was thinking. Was he wondering how the hell this could be happening? Was he thinking it was a trick, and she might scold him soon? Or had he given that up for want of whatever came next?

"You are so beautiful..." his raspy voice, throat already dry from panting announced. Misty inhaled deeply, drawing the scent of his body as she undid his trousers. That was what he was thinking. That hardly gave her room for pause. He moved his hands up, arching back a bit as he removed his heavy hauberk and dropped it on the floor. Misty undid the ties to his trousers as he worked the frog buttons of his dress shirt. He wore a light, cottony white shirt underneath that, and he let the over-shirt just hang open. Misty's hands slipped into the shirt, stroking his tummy before pulling open his pants, and drawing them down. Misty melted at the sight of slightly more flesh than even Alps offered her, at least in how wide. That heavy member bounced a bit before her nose and she could not keep her hands off for even a second. She embraced it with her dexterous digits and began to stroke him before her nose, drawing in his heady, masculine scent. A bead of pre rolled from his tip, spread quickly by her stroking hand, slick and warm.

"Magnificent... this is everything I wanted..." Misty half whispered. She thought that perhaps the lupine male tried to say something, but she engulfed about half his cock in her hot, wet mouth and he only squeaked out something unintelligible at her. The gold-furred wolf slipped her hand up under his heavy sack and cradled it as she slipped her other hand along his lower back under his shirt. She held her head essentially in one place and worked his cock with her tongue, hard and slow. The coiling, undulating motions of it drew that salty pre to her gullet and she could not get enough. He held himself ridged against the wall, legs parted slightly and hands both on the wall itself, one occasionally slipping down to hold Misty's shoulder. He panted out raggedly and winced or gasped with pleasure occasionally as she swirled and darted her tongue around and along the underside of his shaft. Misty delighted herself with the moans she pulled from Leal, his wavering breath unsteady with the intense pleasure the stand-in Queen caused him. She writhed, longing for pleasure herself, but she

had learned the joy of pleasuring another with Alps, and this was exactly the same, if not more, because she had no idea how long it had been for Leal, but he was new to Diera so this pleasure was likely very welcome. Leal's hips trembled a bit.

"Milady, I beg mercy..." he whimpered, arching a bit against Misty. She looked up at him, a pained expression of deep pleasure fixed upon his handsome face. He didn't seem to need mercy. "I am unaccustomed... I fear I shall disappoint..." She then sighed hotly, realizing what he was begging about. He was afraid of cumming too soon. In playing with the queen's slave, Misty had learned that a quick, easy first climax made it so Alps could last a long time once he caught his breath and really got down to business. She wanted nothing less than that from her new companion. She smiled and slipped her hand up and down his obviously aching swollen cock a few times to spread the wetness of his pre and her saliva, before engulfing him again. She moved her hand to the base of his tail to hold him steady and keep him from thrusting.

"Mmmnh..." she moaned around his member as he throbbed hard in her mouth. She drew back, speaking around his twitching shaft. "... If you were to disappoint me, you would have had to leave fifteen minutes ago." She growled hotly, insinuating that she was already happy with what she had been presented with. She planned to enjoy him much more, however, whether he understood those plans or not. He winced again as her mouth overtook his cock, and she stroked her muzzle slowly, evenly up and down his throbbing girth, pre spreading over her tongue again as he held his hips as still as he could, still trembling.

"I... I'll..." he whimpered as Misty cupped his balls again. They immediately drew close to his body, telling her he was out of time. She drew back, holding just the tip in her mouth and fluttering her tongue at the sensitive underside of the tip as she undulated his orbs in her loving, warm palm. A much more copious amount of pre spilled over her tongue as he whimpered loudly, crossing the point of no return, only an inch held in the councilor's mouth as her tongue drummed at it hotly. "Nnnngaaaaaahhh!" he roared out, and then stifled himself, as that first powerful shot of his cum splashed the roof of the gold lady wolf's mouth. She slipped her hand back from his tail to pump his shaft wetly as he exploded in her mouth, still holding the tip in her lips as his heavy, salty seed blasted her tongue. This was not one of Alps' small climaxes that she was used to warming up with, he really let loose hard! Every hot, gooey streamer of his release was swallowed down, the high council member satisfying more than one manner of hunger in those guttural contractions of her eager throat. Leal sank down suddenly, his knees giving out, putting a few smaller ropes of seed over Misty's blue robes. She giggled a bit and held Leal up as he rested on his knees before her, trembling.

"Whoa there, Leal... Take a breath, I'm not done with you. That's good, breathe... breathe..." Misty held him, looking into his eyes as she licked her lips.

That was perhaps the most emotionally gratifying blowjob she'd ever given. There was something about practically destroying someone with pleasure that had no match in the sense of satisfying experiences.

"S-sorry..." he panted. "Only done this... a few times..." He leaned back a little, his twitching cock still bouncing in front of him. He kicked off his trousers the rest of the way, having left them only on one foot once Misty really started playing him in her muzzle. He needed to just to keep his footing. Now, on his knees before her, he pulled at the sash of Misty's robes. She smiled and helped him to open them up, leaving her warm, soft-furred body bare underneath. He sighed happily, trying to catch his breath and enjoying slipping his hands over her heavy breasts in the meantime, teasing her nipples with pinching, tugging fingertips as she rose up to let him touch freely. He finally gave her what she was longing for the most.

"Yesssss!" she whimpered softly as his fingers caressed her sex with a nearly sickeningly wet squish. She was soaked worse than she could ever remember being. "Please, yes!" she whimpered.

"Oh heavens, milady..." Leal marveled in a panting breath, hooking his fingers easily into her tight sex. The sound of his stroking fingers was so lewd and scandalous. She thought that she should perhaps be ashamed, but as his fingertips teased against her glistening, slick clit, she just shuddered and enjoyed, wrapping her arms around Leal's shoulders and biting at his neck with need. She wouldn't need much, just a little and she could join his level of pleasure fully. She was on pins and needles with need and intense lust after giving that incredible blowjob, and all she needed was a little.

But Leal gave her a lot. He pushed three fingers into her suckling, soaking honeypot, holding her shaking body with his other hand as he pushed his thumb against her clit. He stirred heavily at that little nub with what seemed like instructed skill as he more slowly undulated those wide-spreading fingers inside her. Misty could only think of his thick, swollen cock, that girth widely spreading her sex, just as she had felt it in her hand, then her mouth. She bit into his shoulder harder to stifle a long, loud cry as the sound of fluid spattering on an expensive library rug was heard. Misty was completely unashamed then as she gushed around those pumping digits. Leal sped up his hand, letting his thumb strum over her clit as his fingers pounded in and out of the sexy intellectual reduced to whispered drooling profanities over his shoulder. Who bothered teaching a guard something like that? Where did he learn it? Why the fuck did it matter?!

Misty finally reared back up, pulling her robes off and casting them down under her to keep her dribbling sex from further marking the carpet. Her clothing was easier to replace. She then turned around, a bit dizzy from her release. She lowered her chest over her hands, cupping her own breasts.

“Oh by the essence yes...” panted Leal, who understood her offering easily and got into position behind her. Misty whimpered loudly with approval and invitation as he slipped a hand around his again throbbing cock, worked up again from bringing her to an easy and rushing release. The moment she felt his tip slip against her folds in the perfect angle, she cast herself back hard into his lap, impaling herself deep upon his tightly swollen shaft.

“Oh yes!” cried the lady wolf, shaking with need as she felt him hilt inside her, those tight, spongy depths squeezing him hard in loving internal steamy embrace. The guard behind her put his hands both on her hips and cried out hoarsely.

“Nnn - fuck!” He was obviously surprised at how much she wanted that, but Misty could not deny herself any longer. She gritted her teeth tightly, and began to roll and grind her hips back against his, still sailing in the afterglow of her first hard climax. She wanted more. She wanted that last most intimate gift Leal could give as well! She then cried out happily, not caring how much noise she made in this normally empty wing of the castle. He began to pump heavily from behind, holding her hips tightly, grunting as he seemed to intentionally slam himself hard into her haunches to let her feel deep, deliberate penetration. He clutched her hips with strong, vice-like hands, actually slightly painful with his claw tips pushing into her hide through her thick fur. And she loved every bit of it.

As he drove hard into her, she jerked back to meet him, blow for blow, body lurching, both huffing and puffing heavily as they fucked so lewdly on the library floor. Misty had been building this up for months, no, nearly a year and it was all coming to a head. She grunted ferally, letting herself go completely with this helpful young guard. Leal began stroking himself inside her faster, pistoning his wide, tightly swollen cock in and out of her suckling honeypot with almost reckless force, not at all afraid to be rough with the councilor.

“I’m gonna cum, Leal!” the gold wolf female cried. “Don’t stop. Don’t slow. I want to cum around you!” she panted, shaking a bit, tightening her leg muscles, raising her hips a bit. It was going to happen. It was going to be hard and so satisfying. Just as the lady lupine held herself ridged to let it happen, to explode around that pounding wolf-cock, Leal grunted loudly, in a sudden panicked tone, and pulled out, pumping his cock with his hand against Misty’s pussy. He seemed to be trying to rub her with his tip to finish her off, but the loyal and understanding guard seemed to fear that Misty was desperate the way she was because of a more biological kind of need. He wouldn’t want to needlessly complicate her life, after all. However, it was the wrong month for that, and it was sure as fuck the wrong moment for the guard to pull out. Misty cried out in frustration, turned, and tackled Leal, slamming him onto his back.

“Wait! Think about what – “he tried to complain, to get her to hear reason through what he obviously suspected was merely a hormone-driven haze. Normally, she would understand his predicament, but right then, she could not take the interruption.

“If I say don’t stop, you *listen!*” Misty barked, not hearing any of it. “I’m not in my season, so *fuck me*, damn you!” she clamped her hands on his shoulders and took his cock back inside her already spasming pussy. She had been right on the edge. He planted his feet firmly on the carpet and began slapping his thighs hard to hers, pistoning his cock in and out of her seizing depths once again. He staggered to a stop.

“I’m cumming!” he barked helplessly. Misty grabbed Leal’s shoulders, snarling as she pounded her tight sex over his throbbing cock with ruthless force. She shocked herself with the force she used on her suddenly helpless guard, and that, paired with the rushing groan he made when he immediately began hurling hot streamers of his spunk against her cervix, lit Misty’s loins like a powder keg. She gave a short bark, and then a long, happy howl of pleasure, grinding savagely down into Leal’s lap, riding him slow and hard as her climax raged through her and his seed sprayed tumultuously over her inner flesh, against her cervix, and all over his lap.

“Misty – Gaaaaa!” he finally shouted as she continued to rub against him beyond the timing of general comfort in his waning climax. The wolf then finally huffed loudly and flopped against the pinned guard.

“Oh Leal... Oh by the stars and all the green in the valley, Leal...” Misty panted mindlessly, not even sure what to say, but feeling a million times better. She wagged her thick, fluffy gold tail gladly over her lower back as she squeezed that thick, but softening cock inside her.

“This job... is a lot more... physical than Lunaris... had led me... to believe...” the raspy wolf puffed over Misty’s ears. She took her glasses off, since they were not on straight anyway.

“So long as you hold your tongue...” Misty crooned weakly, already looking forward to crawling happily into her bed, “... You can expect you may feel mine again.” She grinned a bit at the handsome guard who lay in a wet mess under her. “I hope I didn’t hurt you...” Misty remarked, suddenly remembering how roughly she cast him down onto the floor in her desperation for her release and his own inside her.

“Well, if I get to feel that tongue of yours again like I did tonight...” Leal murmured melodically, “... we can forgo any discussion of hazard pay.” He and Misty giggled warmly before embracing on the library floor. Her friends and lovers would be facing dangers to be sure, but she had considered them lucky in

that they did not have to face them alone. Now, Misty did not have to face her worries for them alone either, and her heart sang with exhausted, satisfied joy.

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 3

Misty sat perched upon the throne of the queen, feeling very much not like the queen. She had heard some news that was distressing, and was going to have an audience with someone she had not seen in a while who was there to formally deliver this possibly very bad news. This was the side of being royalty, of being in charge that drove Nita to such darker feelings as to be unkind to Alps when she first met him. It was easy to become jaded when all one ever received was bad news. With Alps around, somehow things had gotten better, and Misty hoped some of this bad news would be slow to come while she took over. She adjusted her glasses as the door opened. Leal, the guard that she had met in a more intimate fashion only a night before was the one manning the door.

She might not have given him a second look had the previous night not happened, but there was an appreciative, reassured glance that passed between them. She felt immediately a little bit stronger. It became readily apparent why Nita's attitude had changed so much with Alps. Leal comforted her by just being there. Alps had been Nidaja's most genius tactical move. Perhaps the general had no idea that he would mean so much to the empire as he ultimately did, but the original intent had been sound. He pulled Nita back from her depression. He helped her more than Nidaja likely ever intended.

Now, as the door opened, a black-robed figure entered the room. Leal closed the door, but remained close at hand. A guard had to remain in the room any time the doors were closed for a meeting, even though Misty knew the person well, and did not fear anything but the news they would bring. Her head down already, the dark-robed figure bowed, and then lowered the hood of her cape. It was Alps' childhood friend, Tia. She looked sadly at Misty, who regarded her with sympathy.

"It's true then?" the councilor asked, adjusting her glasses. The grey-furred female regarded the guard in the room, and then looked back to Misty.

"My deepest apologies for being a dark harbinger, Milady... But the rumor which preceded me is the very definition of truth." Tia said, her voice as heavy as her heart appeared to be.

"Then Azia has been murdered?" asked the gold-furred wolf. Tia choked a bit at that. They had been friends and lovers, deeply close. Misty stood up and moved over

to Tia swiftly, wrapping her in her arms. The young girl broke into sobs. She had likely cried like this a great deal coming from Kishu Valley where they had based the Spirits of Silverlight.

"It happened in the night... a coward's quest. I was only out of the room for a moment, and when I came back, the monster was upon her, stabbing and stabbing and stabbing." Tia inhaled deeply, clenching her fists.

"Was the murderer caught?" Misty asked.

"I caught him myself." Tia responded darkly. "And I was foolish. I ended his life before I could find out if he acted alone, or even why it happened. But, I heard him when he was killing her. Saying that too many died to bring the Silverlight their power and that Azia would not forsake them to the crown." Misty gritted her teeth at that. That was a very bad sign indeed.

"So there was discontent within the Spirits of Silverlight itself?" asked the councilor. Leal gritted his teeth as well.

"There were always those within the rank that we knew joined because they wished to remove the queen from power." Tia stood up again, seeming to be distracted from her mourning by the discussion, at least. "Azia did not particularly embrace their ideals, I think, but their support was, at least financially, quite necessary in the early days of our group, you see. The original plans did not consider that Nita would change her policy in dealing with Mannus, and never considered that the Spirits of Silverlight would tolerate the royal house, but things, as you know, changed." Tia sighed, and leaned against one of the columns that ran along either side of the violet-colored carpet that cut its path to the throne.

"But not everyone in the Spirits of Silverlight thought that they had changed. Or else, they were not going to change." Misty reaffirmed.

"Not only that. Azia became aware that there were those who did not care about the resistance against Mannus, which is what our group was originally about, they cared only about removing Nita from power. This makes no sense to us. To have us united against Mannus makes more sense than starting a war against the crown, especially when the opinion of the people was rapidly changing in her favor. Azia ejected four of the highest ranking members of our group, which they said she did not have the power to do. She was the tactical leader, they said, not a political fixture, and she could be removed. She was not afraid, and told them not to even return to Kishu Valley." Misty spoke up sagely.

"It would seem they did. I think it is important that you provide us the names of those individuals who would conspire so against the queen as to kill her allies and destabilize our lands. Now is a very sensitive time. They likely do not even know how fragile things are." Tia nodded, providing Misty with a scroll, which had, as she glanced

over it, a more detailed account of the matter, including the names of those she suspected to be part of the plot against Azia.

"I was not able to gain the... the support of the Spirits of Silverlight before I left." Tia said with a stammer in her voice. "I was forced to flee. They turned against me like animals when it was learned Azia was murdered. They accused me of making a power grab, but I knew that idea was put into their heads by the ones responsible. It was widely known that the four were dismissed, and yet, there they were, in the meeting hall. Azia was a thorn in the queen's side, I know... but this lot... they are more like a dagger in her side, waiting to push into her. They are dangerous. Nidaja and the Queen should be warned, and security around them should be increased tenfold."

"I can go to her villa in the mountains and see to it this is done." Leal stated, bowing reverently to Misty. He had not forgotten his place in her company when the location was public the way Alps tended to, the councilor found.

"I will have you do so later. By cover of darkness, Leal." Misty looked to Tia, shaking her head sadly. "I am deeply sorry that things have come to this. I know it has been hard. It sounds like you have nowhere to go presently, as your home was in Kishu, and if they know that you were aware of these things, that place is not safe for you. You may stay here in the castle for now. I will get this all taken care of. I thank you for bringing us this news, dire though it may be. I do not doubt that we will be able to get it under control. Azia gained support with the impression that the Queen was weak. That illusion has been largely dispelled. It will be hard for them to get support now, and we will act against them first, and spread the news of their betrayal. I am glad that you have been delivered to us alive, Tia, and I commend your ability to escape them, because I can assure you that they did not intend it."

"If it is your will, then, Milady..." whispered the grey-furred lady wolf, pulling her hood back up, "I would retire to the guest quarters for now. I remember its location." She looked about, seeming to try to locate others that she knew. Alps, Nita... Nidaja... All of them were not present for this. Misty frowned. She needed a friend in this, and the place was nearly empty of those she could count on. She had missed by days the ones that she had come to for comfort in the hardest days of her life. Misty would see to her safety in this place. The young lupine turned and ventured back out the way she came, walking slowly, choking back her tears again. It would be a hard time for her, Misty knew. She looked back to Leal, and sighed.

"Never good news, is it?" he asked. "Will I take a missive to the queen's mountain retreat? Or shall I take it to Lunaris, and have him assure its safety, and her majesty's?" he asked.

"Leal..." Misty said in a hushed tone.

"Yes, Milady?" the attentive and energetic grey-furred guard asked, standing tall with determination.

“Lock the door, and come here.” Her words were solid and commanding, something that he had not heard her speak before. The guard did immediately and loyally as told, and came back to her throne, looking through her round glasses, into her green eyes.

“What is it?” he asked. “I know I will be sworn to secrecy. It’s a matter of her highness’ safety.” He stated this, punching at his chest through his chain mail shirt.

“We cannot take warning to the queen.” Misty explained.

“What? Why?!” asked the guard incredulously.

“Because I am unsure of her current location.” Misty answered matter-of-factly. Leal furrowed his brow.

“She’s missing?” he asked, seeming suddenly fearful. “I just get this post, and she’s missing?” Misty waved her hand dismissingly, shaking her head.

“No, she’s not missing, she’s just travelling. She’s with Nidaja and Alps and her friends. I was not kidding when I said things were really sensitive right now. You have heard some funny rumors around the castle, yes?” asked the councilor in a hushed tone. The guard lowered his voice as well.

“Yes, but Master Lunaris has strictly forbidden me from rumor-milling.” The guard bowed again reverently to show that he held himself to a high standard. He was very serious about doing right by the royal house. Misty was pleased to see it. She took his hands in hers.

“Tell me a few of the rumors you have heard?” she asked. He perked up.

“Oh, nothing involving plots or dangers to her majesty! All I speak to here love her!” he barked. Misty smiled wryly.

“Yes, but what *do* you hear?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” The Mountain Grey male thought a moment. “Weird stuff mostly. The kind of things you would expect to hear in a tavern by people with too much time, too much drink, and big imaginations. I haven’t paid it much of a mind.” He leaned against the throne, and then caught himself, seeming appalled that he would do such a thing. He thought a moment as those green eyes scanned him some more. “I heard that there’s hyena’s hanging out in the castle. Asuna, they said. Just walking around unguarded, but no one can prove it, y’know?” Misty smiled at that.

“That’s an interesting one, certainly. Any others?” she asked. Leal wagged his tail, seeming to enjoy making her smile.

“Yes, right. Well, there’s one that said someone got out of a Shadowfall Crystal, which is pretty good drunken babble. They said that the queen is getting married, but that one seemed almost credible because of who was saying it. They said that it was to the guy who killed a bunch of Uruk out in the mountains on the old continent. I hear little things about people and stuff here... Mostly intimate things about what goes on in the gardens when no one’s around. People love those kinds of rumors.” Misty stroked Leal’s ears a bit, which made him beam a wide grin to her.

“Well, more or less, all of that is true.” The councilor said this very mildly. “Those are actually pretty mundane compared to some of the things that are really going on.” The guard stood up again, looking blankly at Misty.

“What? It can’t all be true. The Shadowfall thing...” Misty shook her head.

“That one’s definitely true.” Leal seemed to understand the weight of that.

“And it actually gets bigger than that?” he asked with a sinking tone.

“Nita and Alps and Nidaja have gone with the Asuna who were here to attack ... the enemy... right in his homeland. They have something that will do great damage to the Uruk, and this is a serious, serious opportunity. No one knows where she’s going. She is in more danger just in what she is doing than the Spirits of Silverlight could ever actually pose to her. She has really powerful friends with her and it’s still more dangerous.” Leal rocked side to side slowly.

“Oh dear heavens...” he whispered softly. “So, what is to be done about the attempt against the royal house? If they find out that Nita’s not there at her retreat, they could start saying that the queen’s already gone, and make an attempt at you. Nidaja is away, and the armies are not based in Diera right now. A real attempt to overwhelm the castle might be successful.” Leal paced a bit.

“Right. Which is why you are going to bring me Lunariss. Ask him to find Ceriss and bring her here. The castle is a little safer than you think.” Misty stated, smiling. “For everything this group thinks they know about what is going on, I have a really big surprise for them when they make their move, and I intend to deal with them before they ever get to the castle. Azia was a friend, and Tia was hurt in all of this too. I don’t get to say it often, but it’s time to inflict a bit of preemptive damage. Are you with me, Leal?” Misty asked, leaning over the throne and looking at him. The lupine guard narrowed his eyes and nodded.

“For my entire life, Milady.” He stated this while saluting his leader and rather unexpected lover.

The white-furred former slave stood with his back against the mast of the ship, watching the distant heat-lightning, the orange-colored flashes so distant he could not even see the clouds. It was in the opposite direction that they were going, and the storms, as typical to that area of the ocean, were popping up, raining themselves out, and dissipating. They were not likely to impede the journey of Nidaja's ship. Alps looked around. Everyone was likely below deck, as the sun had set an hour ago, and it was rather calm seas with smooth sailing. One took rest as much as one could on the open water. The world on the waves could be unpredictable.

The young Letai decided to climb up to the top of the mast to see if he could get a better look at the storms, as they flashed, even far distant, so vibrantly. He climbed up to the small crow's nest that capped the mast, hearing the flutter of sails occasionally, and the lapping of water under the keel of the ship. As he pulled himself up to the level of the crow's nest, he nearly fell by letting go, catching himself at the last minute. There, neatly seated in the bottom of it, looking perfectly comfortable, was Ellis. Alps sighed.

"I was wondering if you would be here." Alps sat down on the edge of the crow's nest, and looked to the fox, who had a small metal flask with her. She sipped it. The white lupine regarded her a little longer quietly, and then broke the silence himself. "Why are you here?" he asked, wanting to know if she intended to help on the mission. Knowing he had someone else with him helping was always a comfort.

"I prefer to watch the lightning as I enjoy my tea." She said this with a very pure and sure tone. Alps laid his ears back a bit.

"I mean, why did you come on this journey with us?" He wondered if she actually knew what he was saying and just liked toying with him. He had always suspected. She took another pleasant sip of her tea, watching the flashing lightning. It was much easier to see up on the mast. She finally answered.

"Nobody stated that I could not go." Alps sighed a bit at her answer.

"No one would have even considered it." He said with some exasperation.

"I am glad to hear this." Ellis said softly with a slight smile, eyes closing to enjoy the breeze. Her long, white hair moved gently in the breeze. Alps shook his head a little, watching her black and silver robes move a little in the wind as well, her robes matching the markings of the fox as well, her silver eyes and silver throat seeming to show she was made to wear the robe. He finally spoke with some authority.

"No, I mean, no one would have thought to tell you not to come because no one would have thought you wanted to." The fox looked at him blankly. For how wise she often seemed, she had to be playing him. It was impossible for her to not really understand. She just took another sip of tea and softly answered.

"I come because I want to. That is why. That should be no mystery to you by now, Aris." Alps widened his eyes a bit as she used the name that his mother had given him. Hearing it in her voice haunted him for some reason.

"What are your thoughts on this plan? Do you think it will work?" he asked. Hearing a vote of confidence from the eerily knowledgeable vixen would do much to bolster his bravery. She sipped her tea again, looking out toward the storm. She finally looked back to him with those pupiless silver eyes. He found himself oddly less spooked by them the more he saw them. They had started to feel familiar. She spoke in her calm, measured tone.

"I think you need your friends, Aris. No going off alone now. And they need you. You should see them if it's comfort you desire. All I shall tell you is that you have been lucky until now. I hope that your uncanny ability not to lose your life doing foolish things holds out."

"If you think I will fail, why in the world would you come?" asked the wolf, not at all sure how much help she intended to be. Ellis held her flask upside down to display that she had no more, and closed her eyes as she offered an answer to his anxious question.

"No sadder story was written than one that was never told." Alps felt a chill run through him, feeling like he had heard that before, in a similarly stressful time. Was it a Letai saying or something? He looked down and nodded a bit. The lonely deck below seemed so far away from his private conversation up here.

"I suppose. I hope that our story is not sad. It's for everyone, not just us. If we fail, it might mean an end to all stories." He stated. He looked back up and flinched. The crow's nest was empty. He hadn't noticed her move, heard her climbing down, or any indication that she was leaving. She was just gone, in as long as it took for him to reply to that. "Oh come on!" he barked, and then sighed, climbing carefully down the mast to the deck below.

Alps wanted to clear his head so he could sleep. Talking to Ellis had not quieted his worries. She was right, he needed to talk to friends. He went immediately to the cabin he shared with Nita, and found her to be sound asleep, her weary mind finally letting her drift off a little before, leaving him tossing and turning in the waning light of day, unable to sleep. He had left to go on deck to let her rest, but he didn't want to wake her now. He closed the door to that cabin quietly, and wandered over to Nidaja's cabin. She was sharing it with the Asuna brother and sister, Lyat and Reika. He didn't know how comforting the somewhat eccentric and violent Reika could be, but Lyat was calm, and Nidaja would certainly make the wolf feel better about everything they were doing.

He opened the door, and faltered a bit.

Alps knew that Nidaja and Lyat had become good friends, but he was embarrassed to realize that he had not even considered the thought that they might like some privacy. When he opened the door, he found Nidaja seated on the bed, leaning up against the large hyena's side, his hand down between her thighs, spreading her sex wide around two digits, his other hand pulling up her breast to his lips, gripping tightly at that round mammary and suckling wetly at one of the green-furred warrior-general's tits. Alps began to back up, hoping he wasn't noticed so as to allow them privacy.

"Oh! Alps!" Nidaja huffed with her eyes a little heavy, thighs still wide-spread so he had a delicious view of the penetration of Lyat's charcoal-colored digits, spreading pink flesh so obviously. The wolf paused and chuckled meekly. He didn't mind that Nidaja shared herself with another, but he was embarrassed at having just walked right in on it. Being a slave for most of his life made him not at all possessive.

"Sorry about that. I didn't even consider that you might be relaxing down here with others. Not used to you having the option." He laughed warmly, trying to make it clear to Nidaja that he was not at all upset. She seemed to understand that and moved a hand up to her other breast, rubbing it slowly.

"Lyat..." she whispered, "Don't stop. Alps, come over here." The lady wolf huffed. The white lupine folded his ears back a little in surprise. He didn't want to irritate Lyat by ruining his fun, but the hyena had been told not to stop. Would she allow him to continue, and have Alps watch, or even help? He had not assisted another guy in tending to someone yet, and worried that he might get in the way. It was easier for him with two or more girls, because he was the one pleasuring them, but this was a little more taboo. Yet, to the wolf, it was still arousing. It would satisfy Nidaja, he was sure, since she was asking it. He moved closer to her, swallowing reflexively as her tangy sweet aroused scent reached his quivering nose pad.

Alps already felt the budding arousal through his tense form as he stood before Nidaja. Lyat smiled to him, eyes narrow with coy consideration. He did not seem to mind whatever direction Nidaja was going with this, but Lyat was likely used to this kind of thing around Rios, who could have anything she wanted in her homeland. The former slave smiled at the hyena in kind, wagging his tail a bit as he looked to the general again. Alps gasped a little as he felt her hand go from her breast right to his crotch, stroking him through the black slacks he typically wore after being asked to by his now sleeping beloved. He watched Nidaja, who panted softly as Alps heard the soft, slick sound of Lyat's undulating hand, pushing and stroking into her wide-spread sex. He felt a soft throb through his cock under his slacks as the general grasped him and stroked him.

"Sorry to interrupt, Lyat..." the white wolf panted lightly, a little surprised at his unchanged demeanor with Nidaja. He didn't seem embarrassed at Alps' arrival, a least.

“Nothing to apologize for, Letai.” Lyat pushed his fingers in harder, making Nidaja whimper sweetly. Her hips rose a little, and rolled against his touch. “We both enjoy her affections by her will, so what shame is there in enjoying what she gives?” he asked. Alps flicked his ears at that. It was a pretty sensible way of looking at things, certainly. Alps gritted his teeth as he realized that Nidaja was undoing his pants. He stood there and allowed her to help herself. He would certainly never deny her that if that was what she wanted. He lowered his gaze to watch Lyat’s dark, strong fingers work his lover’s pussy. She rolled her hips softly with a hot pant to her breath as she fished his cock free of his trousers. Alps let them slip down his thighs and stepped free of them, and undid his top, casting it finally to the side, not wanting to spoil his clothes with no means of really washing them. Saltwater did not do black formal clothing any favors. He heard Lyat give a hot grunt, and looked beside Nidaja’s thighs. She had worked him free of his heavy leather pants. She gripped him tightly in her hand, letting him just twitch in her grasp.

The hyena was more impressively built than Alps, but that certainly did not surprise the lupine. Lyat towered over him, and was easily a quarter of his weight heavier. He should be a bit bigger. His masculinity was already wet with his desire for Alps’ lover, and he could not blame him. The wolf, so distracted, still felt every stroke that gentle feminine hand worshipfully guided over his own turgid masculinity. He was grateful, in his slight shyness, to feel his cock vanish into a warm and savory mouth, his lover’s muzzle taking him as she began to slowly allow him oral pleasure that he knew only so rarely and enjoyed so completely. His thighs tightened and relaxed as he felt himself savored over her tongue. The Letai wolf was a little surprised at how quickly his arousal was working over him, but the moment was a little unfamiliar and intense. Having help with his lover in this fashion was new, and he was finding that the pleasure of another close to him still made him feel happy, regardless of who.

“Is nice to be close to Nidaja, yes?” Lyat asked. Alps huffed out his answer in affirmation, nodding a bit as he let his hips drift toward her mouth softly, looking back down to Nidaja’s lap, seeing those strong fingers dipping in and out of her a little faster, his hand rolling heavily, fingertips surely rubbing over her clit. Lyat knew how to pleasure the wolf, and Alps found he was thankful for that, as she certainly knew how to pleasure him. Nidaja’s white-furred lover glanced back to what the general was doing as well, her hand now fully in motion slipping over the ebon-tinted turgid length of the strong hyena, spreading his wetness up and down his shaft. Alps tilted his head back again. Seeing what she did to Lyat made him far more aware of what it looked like when she did it to him, and it was all the more arousing. He felt Nidaja’s muzzle separate from his aching flesh, holding it tight in her hand, letting it twitch as her pre drizzled down over her chest. The wolf felt a little self-conscious, but the pleasure was fast making it a moot point to him. It was enjoyable even with Lyat right there. Nidaja made it enjoyable, and the hyena was respectful. The lady wolf only let him cool in the evening air for a little while, however.

Her next move had her slip to the side, guiding Alps to the side with her as she straddled Lyat’s lap. The Letai wolf blushed softly as she slipped her opposite hand, not

holding his own turgid member, down between Lyat's thighs. The general murmured in a soft tone,

"If either of you knew... how much I had thought of this these past few weeks..." She panted a bit as she tucked the tip of that ebon spire between her wet, puffy folds, enticed so wetly by Lyat's fingers, and gave a ragged sigh as she sank down in his lap. Alps could only stare shamefully down his body where he could see his lover's hips push down into Lyat's. She spread wide around the meaty girth of the hyena's masculinity and took him in completely in a single hot, undulating stroke, pushing herself tight into his lap, and groaning happily. "Oh, so intense, loves..." she gasped, making Alps wag his tail as the Asuna male slipped his hands over Nidaja's thighs.

Alps gave a shuddering groan as he watched his lover lean forward and take his cock into her mouth again, slowly gliding hand and muzzle over his aching length, having it twitch against her tongue as he spilled pre along its silky length. He wondered if this was entirely new to Nidaja. Her desperation seemed to indicate that it was at least very uncommon. He watched as she began to undulate her hips heavily, and Lyat leaned back a little, giving her some room as he held one hand on her thigh, and moved the other up to her breast, pulling and rolling a fat, eager nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Alps grinned and seized the other plump, unattended mammary, giving her a similar treatment.

"Yessss.." the general sighed hotly, her hips jerking a little harder, having pulled off Alps' cock a moment to stroke him in her hand. "Both of you, oh so heavenly..." She was nearly at a loss for words it seemed, to describe how much she enjoyed that. This only encouraged Alps more. He let his hips roll, moving his other hand to the back to the back of the general's head, holding the point where her red and gold headband cinched below her ponytail. He let his cock slide slowly in and out of her deep muzzle as she let her hand work his base. He felt that familiar throb returning, telling the wolf he could cum easily if this kept up.

He was impressed at how steady she held her mouth for him given how heavily her hips worked the hyena between her thighs. Lyat gave a hot, lusty grunt of need as his hands clutched the edge of the small bunk that he and Nidaja had been sitting on. Alps grinned at the pair and rolled his hips steadily. He had taken this rare treat from Nidaja only a handful of times, and he had never been so aggressive as to actually move his thighs like this while holding her head. He had never outright pushed into her mouth as he did then, but she seemed to only enjoy it more. The white lupine sped up a little, and Nidaja's hips sped up too. Lyat gave a hot growl, his strong body rising up and holding her hips a bit, as if to slow her down, but she just rolled them harder once he was hilted in her.

"Mmmnnph.." Nidaja gave a plaintive whine, and then another, higher pitched. Her hips jerked a little harder, and Alps watched her, his eyes almost hazy from the sexual need building, making it hard to keep them open. He ached to give her all of it, every drop, but he wanted to know when Lyat gave in... For some reason, he found

himself extremely focused on Nidaja being flooded by his Asuna friend because he wanted to see his friend rewarded with the same pleasure that Nidaja would give. He could feel the warmth of the essence in the room as well, something that, over time, he was becoming more and more able to feel. He panted happily as he stroked his thighs for Nidaja, feeling his sack drawing tighter. It was okay for him to release, because she could then ride the hyena under her as hard as she liked.

"I'm close, beloved..." he whispered into Nidaja's ear. The warrior general tightened her hand a little on the lupine's cock and huffed through her nose, but pulled her mouth off him, puffing heavily, unable to breathe through her nose anymore.

"Nnn..." She began heavily stroking him in her wet hand, angling him at her chest. Alps widened his eyes.

"There's not bath on the ship." He panted.

"So make her wear it to shore, if that's what she wants." Lyat panted out mirthfully, hips rising and falling a bit under hers as he worked his own pleasure in appealing selfishness. Alps for that brief moment only let himself slip closer to climax by imagining the look of his climax hitting and sending thin gooey ropes of his seed all over her velvety breasts, face, and neck. However, at the thought of being unable to get it out of her fur, she did stop, twitching softly.

"I am gonna pop, lovers... Then I can tend Alps properly." The general panted this out raggedly, and then leaned back, bouncing harder in Lyat's lap. Alps let Nidaja just hold his pink-toned masculinity as that thicker, slightly longer phallus of his Asuna friend was ridden roughly by the general. Alps bristled and decided to take a moment to just focus on the appearance of the essence as it happened, and to try to draw upon it the way he did in the Shadowfall. He was sure they would not mind. The halo of energy around Nidaja was impressive, glowing in a gentle green tone, extending out a couple of inches from her rolling body as her tongue lolled out almost comically in her enjoyment of Lyat's filling girth. The hyena, he found with some surprise, had essence, though not as strong, just barely extending beyond his fur, but it was crimson in color. Alps was surprised in finding that not everyone had the same kind of essence.

He did not get to consider that long, however. He was distracted by his lover's sudden shivering halt over Lyat's lap, his hands wrapped around her to hold her chest, mauling her with rolling, grasping, clawing hands. She held achingly still a moment, and Alps glanced down to see the base of Lyat's dark flesh jerking softly, not from his muscle movements, but hers. Nidaja finally gave a hard, heavy groan, and her essence flared brightly. Alps grinned, his pre slowly trailing down Nidaja's arm as she still held his member in her hand. He let his own essence mingle with Nidaja's own, and felt a warmth flow through him, perhaps a sensation that went along with her release, but as he connected his essence to hers, it mixed and drew to him, letting him actually see it come to his own energy. It was exciting on his own to actually know he was drawing, a

skill the Letai valued, but far more he enjoyed how it made him feel. It was utterly euphoric.

Lyat grunted loudly as Nidaja's inner flesh seized around him again and again, and began to twitch hard as well, his own essence flaring out almost as wide as Nidaja's had. Alps drew upon it too, and felt a rush of excitement and adrenaline with it, feeling almost static as he connected with the powerful Hyena warrior's own essence. And as he watched that black base twitch as Nidaja squeezed around it, he saw pearly fluid spill down his base, over his dark sack, and onto the navy blue sheets. Alps groaned hotly, his own body twitching as he found, stunned, that he nearly climaxed just from seeing his lover flooded as he had down so many times before. He had just never watched it, and it was one of the most intensely erotic and incensing things he had ever witnessed. Lyat was not sparing in how much he gave, sinking back a bit, pushing his hips up and just pumping his lust into her claiming depths as Nidaja cried out.

"Yes! Oh Lyat yes, so deep... Mmmh!" Her hips jerked a little to help Lyat along in his release, and Alps drew upon the male just before watching Nidaja's essence flare again. Curious, Alps tried to touch both.

This turned out to be almost a mistake. The flood of pleasure he felt from joining the two climactic energies made his sack draw tight, and he had to force himself to calm down as he nearly joined the pair in rushing orgasmic bliss, which would have been a shock to Nidaja, and probably hilarious to the still spasming Lyat. He managed to pull himself back from the edge, but whimpered out meekly to his lover.

"I'm still close love... take me... I need it..." He groaned softly as Nidaja panted raggedly. She was not able to use her muzzle for how heavily she breathed. She slipped off of Lyat as he gave a hot groan of satisfaction, onto her knees on the floor, and stroked the still wet ebon shaft as she looked over her shoulder to Alps. The slave looked at Nidaja, a bit stunned at the offer, and unsure how to feel as he looked at the pearl-lined pink folds of his lover. Something felt wholly taboo about taking her right after the hyena, but he had rather enjoyed breaking taboos with his lovers before, so he sank to his knees.

"Nnnh... Careful, sensitive." Lyat grumbled as the general stroked his shaft in her hand lovingly. The general panted happily and gave a soft whimper. "Looks like is having something of addiction to feeling full of your lovers, General Nidaja." The Asuna chuckled at this. "Rios is suffering same affliction. Very pleasant, she say." Alps moved his hands to Nidaja's hips, and then pushed forward, his thick, aching shaft slipping into her. In the short time she had let him think about what he was about to do, he had slipped back from release. If it had been instant from hand to her sex, he would have probably gone over the edge right away, but as he sank into her now, he felt he had a little time to play. He was surprised at just how wet playing with Lyat had left her, and while he knew full-well that part of the wetness was from Lyat, he simply did not care.

He lurched heavily into his lover, who embraced the hyena's hips, and panted against his tummy. Alps throbbed again, letting his eyes focus on the essence again, seeing Lyat's die down a bit as he rested from his release, but Nidaja's only expanded more, pleasure at having a second lover bury himself in her sex crackling through her. Alps contacted that essence and drew upon it as he pumped harder, slapping his heavy sack to Nidaja's soaked sex, and grunting out just as gutturally as Lyat had. The Letai wolf sped up some, the lewd, wet sounds of his union with Nidaja rising between them.

"Oh heavens – Uuuunnnng!" Nidaja hunkered against Lyat and exploded around Alps' pistoning shaft. The wolf felt the heat of her release in his lap, and knew the mess that it made, but the lupine male found only that he liked it when Nidaja made a mess of him, marked him, claimed him with her body the way she did. Her inner flesh squeezed him tightly, stroked him, suckled his cock inside her. He was close as it was, but this was just too much. It made him throb hard inside her, and he doubled over her, cheek against her back as he felt himself finally slip over the edge. Nidaja yipped loudly, an almost hiccupping sound he had not heard her make before. Alps gave a sinking groan loudly against Nidaja's back as he felt his climax and Nidaja's through her essence. His tail even bounced a bit over his back with each powerful clutch of his prostate as he spewed his load hard inside her already flooded passage. Swept away were his concerns about taboo or how much of a mess it was, the experience was raw, unparalleled pleasure, sharing himself with his lover not only for his pleasure, but to experience hers. Nidaja's excitement, the powerful "want" that he felt from Lyat, the sense of control and power he felt, and Alps' own deep love for this lady general all collided inside him as he drew the essence around him.

Lyat remained silent for a while as Alps panted against Nidaja's back, wagging his tail slowly. The quiet seemed relaxed, but when he finally looked up to Lyat to thank him for being willing to share that with his lover, the hyena looked afraid. It was not the expression that the wolf was expecting. The Asuna male was staring right at him, having gone a bit soft in his post orgasm in Nidaja's still quivering, clutched hand. The lady wolf looked up and licked his tip a few times, before looking up and noticing his expression.

"You okay Lyat? Oh, I didn't bite you did I?" she asked, seeming uncertain if she could have during her climax, and inspecting his inner thigh and other bits.

"What is... why is wings on wolf?" Lyat stammered. Alps slipped out of his lover, onto his knees behind Nidaja.

"What?" he asked, not understanding the Asuna's question at all. He looked at the horrible mess of his lap and grinned sheepishly. He would be enduring saltwater, he was sure. It would take nothing less to get him presentable on deck again. Nidaja looked at Lyat, who stared at Alps, so she turned to look at her lover. She gasped loudly, her face surprised, though not fearful. It was at that moment that Alps realized that there was light other than that of the torches, glowing softly with pure white on faces that should have had only yellow-tinted lamp light. Alps swallowed. It was him.

Was he glowing? Then he remembered what Lyat had just said. Wings. He thought back to the Shadowfall crystal, and his most recent escape. Those massive wings that had unfurled from his back, glowing with bright light were still bright in his memories. He looked over his shoulder to see their massive form, but saw something a little different.

The wings were there, just as he remembered, but they were not large. They were quite small. Stretched out, his entire wingspan would likely only have been the length from his elbow to his fingertips, so he could barely even see his wingtips as he looked over his shoulder. Was it because he drew too much energy all at once? His back felt warm, but he didn't feel uncomfortable at all. He felt quite pleasant with them.

"Oh Alps those are adorable!" Nidaja cried suddenly, making the white wolf flinch. "That's the cutest thing I've ever seen! How did you do that!" she giggled. The general sat up on the bed beside Lyat, who softened his expression a bit because it didn't seem to distress Nidaja. Perhaps she knew what it was about and was not cause for alarm. Alps shrugged a bit, feeling a little more meek.

"I... I'm not sure." He answered. "I was practicing essence drawing with you and Lyat, and I think maybe I drew too much. They went away when I used energy to get us out of the Shadowfall before, so maybe if I use energy these will fade away too? I think they are just light." He reached back to touch one of them, and furrowed his brow.

He could feel it. Not only could he feel the slip of silky warmth between his fingers as if feeling the purest silk glide between them, but he could feel his touch on his wings. They were not an illusion, they were a part of him. He worried a bit. It would be really hard to just wander around with these. What if he was stuck with them for good?

"These are not exactly... low profile..." Alps stated with some concern. Nidaja covered her muzzle, trying to hide her smile. The white lupine was happy that they caused Nidaja such delight, but they would be a pain if he could not travel on a hot day without wearing a cloak.

"I think I shall get Luna." Nidaja said helpfully, picking up a satiny cloth and tending her wet thighs. She could not get completely clean, but she didn't have to go out positively pouring wolf and hyena love. After tidying up a little, she put on her leather-plated skirt and her red and yellow blouse and the armor cuirass. Alps was actually rather surprised at how fast she was able to dress. She padded out, giggling again. The experience with two lovers had made her a little giddy, it seemed. Lyat sprawled out on the bed, stark naked, panting still. He didn't seem to care if Luna saw him naked. Then again, Alps felt that Lyat had little cause for shyness. The white wolf tried to tidy up with the same cloth that Nidaja used. It would have no other use on this voyage, he was sure. It was pretty well soiled by the encounter. He then pulled on his black slacks, leaving his top off, since it would not have really fit over his wings anyway.

"I think they are a manifestation of drawing too much essence." Alps tried to explain a little to Lyat, who nodded stupidly. He was obviously feeling very good from his play with Nidaja. The wolf smiled at him. "You really know how to fill a girl out." The Letai laughed, poking gentle fun at the Asuna. He chuckled in his deep and masculine voice.

"You are lucky fellow, Alps." He stated. "That Nidaja, she loves you. Finding girl like that to love you is rare, and you seem to have many. Is maybe from Letai power, but is a good thing. Rios say you need them." Alps sat up and looked over his shoulders. He moved his wings, a little surprised that they were so easy to control, since he hadn't tried before. It felt odd, but not really bad. He fluttered them a little. It cooled his back, and that was rather enjoyable, so he did that some more.

"I do need them, and I hope to always make them happy." The white lupine rested his chin on his knees. "Do you think they look silly?" he asked.

"No, they is all being strong, powerful, and intelligent girls." Lyat stated wistfully. Alps looked up at the sprawling, lazy, well fucked hyena. He shook his head, rubbing his face.

"The wings, Lyat. Do these wings make me look silly?" he asked. Lyat looked up, and then shook his head.

"No." he said softly. "Old Asuna priestesses is wearing wings for powerful ceremony, maybe that size. It is mark of power. Mark of freedom. The wings is supposed to bring victory and good fortune. It is surprising seeing them, but is never silly. Maybe you will be hiding them from Reika. She probably pulls them." Alps gritted his teeth, not wanting to know what it would feel like to have even the feathers plucked out. He considered the thought that the Asuna might revere his wings. It would certainly be necessary to hide them if he were stuck with them. He gritted his teeth. Would Nita like them? His heart sank a little. Would they cause her worry? Luna walked in with Nidaja then, rubbing her eyes, obviously having been awakened. She looked back to Nidaja and groggily murmured,

"You smell like you've been into the hyenas." She had a playful tone in her voice. "I don't know what that's got to do with me, what did you mean a Letai-specific emergency – oh by the *stars!*" she cried the moment she looked through the door and saw Alps. He fluttered his little wings in full indication of why Luna was called. Nidaja wailed with delight at seeing him use them. He lowered his head, blushing. He was so embarrassed by the little things.

"I was with Nidaja and Lyat and they just... appeared." Alps explained. "I think I drew too much essence." The white-furred priestess sat down on the bed heavily.

"Alps, how often do you draw energy?" she asked incredulously.

“Just a couple times since I figured out how. I wasn’t told this could happen.” He fluttered them again rapidly, and Nidaja bounced with a happy giggle. Luna blushed a little as well; perhaps having just figured out that Alps was drawing from both the hyena and his lupine lover. Having his mother aware of that was a little embarrassing too, but she might have been the only one that could help him.

“Alps, I think you may have been drawing naturally. Maybe not as much, but at least some... How often have you shared pleasure with others? Not just intimate stuff...” Luna looked a bit wistfully at the naked Lyat, who waved to her happily. She looked back to her son. “... How often have you, to your knowledge, been around people who were absolutely elated, full of happiness and joy?” Alps lowered his head in thought. Since he left Chana’s side, he lived his life very clearly to cause that in everyone he surrounded his life with. He loved having people happy around him, and already knew it was perhaps a subconscious desire to draw that caused it, but had he been drawing the entire time?

“Priestess Luna...” Nidaja said softly, sounding more serious, “Making people happy was his purpose in the castle. He’s been around it for two years now. And intimacy has been, at times, more frequent than meals. If he’s been drawing without training, he’s got to be overloaded. Are the wings permanent? I certainly don’t mind them, but...”

“... But it will make it harder for him to travel openly, to be sure.” Luna stated. “We will have to remove them.” Alps whined loudly, cupping his hands over those silky feathers. Luna shook her head. “Oh no! I don’t mean like that. They are an effect of being over-loaded with essence. We just have to use up some of your essence.” Luna reached out and felt the wing in her fingers, Nidaja taking her turn to do the same.

“Do we have to?” she asked meekly. “How do we use up his essence?”

“He has to learn some kind of technique to manipulate the essence and actually practice with it to use it up. At least as much as he drew tonight, which was probably plenty. Lyat’s been chosen by Rios as a lover for a damn good reason. He’s probably the most essence-heavy Asuna she could find.” Alps blushed again, certain that his mother knew he had drawn from him.

“Is there an easy technique I could learn that would also be helpful in our journey?” the white male asked, wagging a bit, trying not to dwell on it.

“Healing techniques are my specialty, Alps, so nothing I could teach you without harming someone, which would probably not go over well. They take a long time to teach, and the few destructive abilities I have, as well as the warding abilities I am capable of, are even harder to control, and require months of practice to even get good enough to burn off your essence.” Alps fretted a bit, and looked at Nidaja.

“How about your abilities to enhance your fighting? Speed and strength?” Alps asked of Nidaja.

“Bad idea.” Nidaja and Luna both answered simultaneously, looking at one another a moment.

“What? Why is that?” Alps asked. Luna answered.

“If you use too much energy in those techniques, you can do severe or even life threatening damage to your body.” Alps cringed. Nidaja elaborated.

“I can’t draw energy nearly as efficiently as my sister. I learned those abilities because those and simple seals are the only ones I can control. If Nita tried them, and over-did the energy, she could break her legs or tear her muscles or even catch fire. It’s not pretty.” Alps shook his head softly at that.

“So, how do we get rid of my wings before we get to land?” he asked, worried that he would be stuck wearing a cloak the whole way. He was not looking forward to that, and even less looking forward to not being allowed to be intimate with Nidaja or his other friends because he could not help but draw their essence. Luna sighed a bit, and rubbed the back of her head.

“I do have one technique that can help. It’s not exactly... allowed. It’s very taboo, but I am capable. I learned a lot of things I was not supposed to near the end. We were getting pretty desperate, and there are things that were not allowed that do not use energy from a forbidden plane. One of the most valued and strict rules had been that we can only draw the essence naturally shed, that which is not attached.” Alps nodded to that.

“I think I read that, yes, but they said nothing about techniques that would allow anything different.” He explained.

“There was one. It is not simple, but it’s not unpleasant.” The priestess looked to Nidaja. “You or Nita will likely want to help with that, given my personal relation to him.” Luna chuckled. Alps blinked at that. She would still be with him though. Would that be okay for Nidaja or Nita.

“Sounds like fun!” the general barked. Alps gritted his teeth. Apparently so. Luna smiled.

“Very well. We will give him a little time to recover from the drawing he’s done tonight, and let me retrain myself to focus the way I need to. We will do this before we embark on land in a couple of days.” Luna stated before standing up tiredly. “For now, I sleep. It’s getting late, and sleep is hard depending on the waves.” She smiled to Nidaja.

"You and Nita can decide who gets to help. Your hyena fell asleep." She nodded to Lyat, who was shamelessly on his back, dozing rather soundly. Alps rolled his eyes at that, and fluttered his wings again, this time subconsciously. He caught himself and stopped just as Nidaja noticed and squealed with delight. This would be a long couple days, and Nita, his beloved Nita, was in for a surprise when she woke up. Alps rested his chin on his knees again. They were a couple days out, and the trip was already overwhelming and crazy. What would the future hold for this dangerous expedition?

In the same private room of the library that Misty had vented her frustrations with a new castle guard a night prior, the golden-furred councilor regarded those at the table, seated around it in official meeting quietly by candlelight. She drummed her fingertip on the table softly. Leal stood by the door, ready to deal with anyone who might venture too close, given the privacy of the discussion. He seemed to take very seriously the level of secrecy that was required for what he was witness to, and he was already involved just because of being present when Tia discussed it.

Alps' young friend had been allowed to retire for the evening, but another castle servant frequently checked up on her and saw to her needs. Misty was concerned because few of the girl's friends were present, and she was grieving terribly. She wanted to make sure she was cared for. Misty had explained everything to Ceriss and Lunaris, who sat side by side, blotting out much of the light the candles provided just in how very black their fur was. Ceriss' fur was so much darker, not even having a shine to it. Something about it seemed to make the light fall away into nothingness, and it made her seem like a shadow. It made Lunaris stand out in comparison, and he seemed obviously unsettled by it, though he was getting used to seeing it.

"So, there it is. I am open to suggestions on how to address this. I think that we should act against the traitors before they have a chance to cause another life to end. They have taken a source of hope and soured it." Lunaris nodded emphatically.

"I suspect they are but a day behind Tia, if that. They will not want Nita to have time to react, to protect herself or call back forces to the island city." He spoke with the same tactical understanding that Nidaja had. He was, after all, her stand-in.

"If they find out Nita's gone, they can make it very bad for us, and will likely attack me instead, knowing I am not so well defended, and don't even have essence abilities or Nidaja to help me. I want to deal with this before it becomes an assault on the castle. A direct attack will be far more destabilizing, and might allow these fools to have claim of real power against the crown, and garner support out of fear, or lack of confidence in the Razelle family."

"Never!" cried Leal. Lunaris cleared his throat to quiet his subordinate.

“How do you wish to deal with them ahead of an attack on the castle?” asked the dark-furred head of the security forces. Leal looked back to him, then to the councilor, and back to the very unusual-looking Ceriss. He had been peering at her since she arrived after him and Lunaris had taken their seats. She looked very unusual. The fur was just uncanny, and wearing a blood red cloak only made the insanely black fur stick out more.

“They cannot be allowed to know Nita and Nidaja are not in the mountain retreat. We have to stop them... All of them... Right there.” Misty was very determined in this. “I just do not know how to accomplish this, and bait them into attacking the villa. People have to actually see Nita and Nidaja there. They will do their research, they will check to be sure, and I am certain if they see it’s not heavily defended, they will attack.” Misty thumped her fist on the table, making Leal jump a little.

“We will make them see Nita and Nidaja then.” Ceriss said, her voice sounding cold and dark as her fur appeared. Leal obviously shuddered.

“We do not have a suitable body double for Nita, and the one for Nidaja is still in Jalana, we don’t have time to send for her.” Misty was irritated with having not considered the necessity of calling for at least her sooner. Ceriss murmured softly,

“When you look at me, what do you see?” she asked, pulling up her sleeve to show her dark arm. It was like looking into a hole where a wolf was supposed to be, and it was made only more obvious when she held her arm up close to the light.

“The scariest freaking thing I’ve ever seen in my life.” Leal stated flatly.

“Don’t be rude.” Lunaris objected. Leal bowed apologetically. Ceriss spoke up in his defense.

“No offense was taken, it is supposed to be imposing. He compliments me.” She pulled her sleeve back down. “It’s essence manipulation, of course. I don’t let the light that strikes my body return in a direction where it can be seen. I allow it to filter through the soles of my feet, typically. It took years and years to master.”

“An Emerald Amanian then?” Leal asked. “I have never heard of such powerful visual essence use. It’s quite fascinating.”

“I’m a Letai Priestess, actually.” Ceriss stated flatly. Misty gritted her teeth, having not explained exactly everything to Leal. He sat in his seat, staring right at her.

“What.” His word fell flat, and he looked like he was unable to even hear an answer.

"Wasn't told, was he? You said you brought him up to speed." Ceriss chastised Misty.

"I didn't mention that part. A lot happened." Misty rubbed the back of her head, looking at the stunned guard.

"Leal is trustworthy. He knows enough anyway, he better be." Lunar is offered for him.

"Letai Priestess?" Leal asked. "You are serious?"

"I've escaped a Shadowfall Crystal." She said this softly. Misty had told him that was not a rumor, but not elaborated as to who escaped. That was enough for the guard. He nodded emphatically.

"An honor to meet you... This... This changes a great many things, yes?" he asked.

"It changes one thing for certain." Ceriss murmured. "Before, you had no Letai Priestess in the castle. Now, you have a Letai Priestess in the castle. But, I opted not to go on the crusade Nita and the others went on. My part of the bargain was I would defend this place. I had hoped to be left alone to rest. If I cannot, I shall make it very, very unpleasant for those who would deny me that." She stood up.

"You still did not explain why having the ability to manipulate essence on your fur like that means you can help make everyone see the queen." Leal stated. He was still very openly stunned.

"I get to decide what light everyone sees... It's not easy, but..." Her dark fur shimmered, and Leal and Lunar is both gasped, standing up suddenly, their chairs sliding back as Misty looked in stunned utter silence into a near mirror image of herself. The duplicate wore the red cloak to mark her as obviously being Ceriss in disguise, but except for a few minor details, white whiskers instead of dark, and perhaps a little tinting of fur here and there, it was a very, very believable disguise. Her pattern was not perfect, but even her fur seemed longer, like Misty's.

"Oh, this... This could work!" Misty barked.

"I shall go with her to make sure that it seems that the queen is being adequately guarded and make it more believable than just a double staying at a mountain retreat." Lunar is stated, bowing to the councilor. "I agree, this should do nicely." The real Misty answered.

"Thank you, Lunar is. This is a good course of action, I agree, I like the direction this takes. Ceriss, do you feel confident you can handle a few assassins?" she asked. "After all, they will be coming after you." The dark Priestess grinned at that.

"I am capable." She turned and left the room, calling after herself, "I shall gather some things and meet back here shortly.

"Leal." the dark-furred stand-in general barked in a commanding tone.

"Yes sir?" he asked, looking up at the larger canine.

"You are coming with us. One guard alone, even if it's me, won't be very convincing, and I want to give the priestess all the support she needs." Leal snapped to attention.

"With Milady's leave?" he asked Misty, in case she did not like being left alone.

"This is a critical task, Leal. You may go." She bowed her head to the brave guard. "You do not mind this?" she asked.

"I am being asked to risk myself in a mission to draw out assassins who would move against the crown, with the help of an actual, live Letai Priestess. This... is every guard's secret fantasy." He gave a hearty laugh, and fell into step behind Lunariss.

Misty watched him go, and then sat back down in her quiet library. She would leave nothing to chance. She would ensure the castle was defended to, and to make sure that happened, she would need to get to work quickly. It was going to be a long night.

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 4

Alps rubbed the back of his head as he looked up at Nidaja, who was still playing with the tiny wings that had erupted from between his shoulders the previous night. It was morning already and he found it strange how natural they felt. It was like they had always been there, but no one had ever noticed. Did everyone have them? Was it just him? Was this normal to the Letai? Were manifestations always wings? Nothing he had ever read had discussed them. He was glad an actual Letai priestess was on the boat to help him with the issue.

The general was clothed in relaxed fashion beside him on her bed as she toyed with the long, silky and simple feathers. The wings were a bit minimalist, having five long primary feathers, and a row of shorter secondary feathers reaching to a crook before the joint that lead down to the base. It gave them an almost playfully small appearance, and made it plain to see they were not useful for flying. They did seem to be useful for making Nidaja happy. Alps could actually feel the warmth of her delight flowing from her as she stroked the feathers. That was not going to make it any easier to release the energy that formed them.

"They are so warm, Alps..." she marveled. "It's not like something that's just... body heat. It's like something that was left in the sun. And the way they glow isn't like the light's coming from them, it's like it's reflected off of them. They are very... magical." Alps had made the same observation, but it was interesting hearing that Nidaja saw them and felt them much the same way.

"There are very *weird*," Alps offered. "If we run into enemies, and any are able to immediately report, I would prefer something so... unusual not make it back to the ears of the Avatar. He would immediately know he was dealing with a serious attempt against him." Nidaja frowned a bit at that, looking at her lover, who sat before her in his black trousers with no shirt on. It would not fit at that moment without some modification.

"Don't worry too much. We can let you wear a cape or cloak or something over them, no one will see them." Nidaja seemed to be rather positive about it. She seemed to understand that Alps was worried about not getting to enjoy the happiness of his friends for the constant need to reduce his essence-charge.

"It's summer." Alps stated flatly.

"War's not comfortable." Nidaja offered just as two dimensionally. Alps nodded a bit at that. She did have a point. There were bigger matters to fret over than just wings on his back. "Does it hurt if I pull at them at all? Can you feel them?" Nidaja did so, not terribly hard. Alps could feel the pressure of her pulling, but it didn't hurt.

"No, I can feel them, but they don't seem to hurt." He felt the wolf general behind him pull a bit harder. "Don't try to rip them off, that can't be good for them." He didn't even want to think about that. Nidaja shook her head.

"Your skin at the shoulder doesn't move." The general sifted through Alps' fur at the base of his little wings. "They aren't attached to the skin, or even your body. It's like they ignore it and are attached to something deeper in." She seemed mystified.

"Maybe they are just essence... Like... visible essence that one can touch?" the former slave considered aloud, "The halo of light people have isn't attached at the skin either and I got these wings while drawing from you and Lyat." Alps said thoughtfully. Luna could answer for certain, but it was interesting to try to figure them out on his own.

As he brought up Lyat's name, the warrior Asuna entered the room and brought in a curious-looking Nita, who he had been sent to retrieve once the sun had risen, giving her time to sleep before subjecting her to the unusual result of Alps' essence-drawing. Alps moved his wings between his shoulders so they were not immediately visible, sitting on the bed facing his life-mate-to-be. She wore a white blouse and a very light and airy-looking skirt that came down just past the knee. It looked like a vacation outfit for her.

"Good morning Nidaja, hello love... You didn't come back last night. You didn't get sick did you?" the queen asked. Alps found that to be a sharp assumption, as he likely would have left her side rather than keep her up all night groaning with illness from the ocean waves.

"No, I am fine... I came to talk with Nidaja..." He pondered the right words to delicately describe his tryst with the queen's sister. He was allowed these encounters and with honor, but he didn't want to seem like he didn't want to be by Nita's side. He had left for reassurance, not physical affection. The affection just kind of happened.

"... And ended up dozing off over here." The general answered for him, seeing him struggle a bit as he tried to protect Nita's feelings.

"Oh! I see!" the general's sister barked brightly, grinning at her lover. "I was so tired, and you needed to tire yourself out! You always have so much energy, love!" She laughed, showing that the idea of it didn't distress her at all.

“That was not the original intent, but no, I could not sleep.” Alps stated. “I guess I was just worried about what we were doing. But you guessed right as to why I fell asleep here.”

“It’s alright, I know you worry.” Nita moved over toward the white lupine who lowered his head a little.

“Also, in the process, I drew too much essence energy. I was not aware that was even a problem, but apparently, for some, it is.” He had felt he knew what he would say to keep from shocking her, but he didn’t feel so sure now.

“Too much?” Nita asked, standing before her lover, who leaned back a little to keep her from seeing the wings yet. “It drifts away naturally on its own, you can’t draw too much, I don’t think. Do you have a headache or something?” she pondered, touching Alps’ brow. Her fingertips were so gentle, and he could so easily feel her love through her touch. He was getting so much more attuned to the emotional state of those close to him. Alps wondered at the speed at which he was gaining experience with the essence. It felt like remembering things, rather than being taught new things.

“Apparently, pure Letai can over-do it.” Nidaja assisted as Alps enjoyed Nita’s touch. “This is especially true if they have not been trained in any techniques that use up the excess, like healing and sealing.” She spoke with an air of authority, as if Luna had not just taught her that night about the subject.

“Oh? How can we tell if he’s had a bit much?” the queen asked. Alps finally leaned forward and spread his little wings out. Nita made a faint little squeak, her eyes wide, shocked but not really fearful. Alps peered at her with a measured stare, wanting so much for her not to be upset with him. This could complicate things for him, and it made him even more strange-looking than the white fur alone did. Would she have reservations about them the way she had on the dock their first day meeting when she saw his fur?

“Aren’t they cute?” Nidaja asked, beaming. She was trying to diffuse the shock and stress from the tense moment.

“Oh goodness, Alps, you ... you have...” The wolf nodded, glad that she didn’t scream at least. He was afraid she might, and he would feel badly for frightening her. Instead, to his surprise, he could feel her adoration flooding over him, just as Nidaja had done when she saw them. Were they somehow enchanted to cause that reaction? He felt stunned wonder from Lyat, who still seemed to feel that way as he watched them.

“They aren’t permanent. Luna knows a technique to make them vanish again.” He wanted to quickly clarify that. Nita nodded and took one of the wings between her fingers.

“Th-They’re real. And they are so *warm*...” she whispered.

“You are not upset?” Alps asked fearfully.

“Of course not, my love... these are pretty. I don’t know why, but they seem to suit you, like they had just been missing before, and I couldn’t place it.” He flittered the wings subconsciously as his tail wagged, getting another happy sound from both sisters. Lyat groaned.

“I think I am needing these when I was younger.” He laughed. “Might not have spent so much time alone.” Nita laughed at that, and then Alps heard a voice that made him freeze.

“It is time for food soon, yes? Is... in here?” Reika wandered right into the cabin, Alps’ wings clearly visible. She held Bone close suddenly, as if listening to him as she stared at the white male in stunned silence. Alps could not hear Bone without holding him, so he was not sure what information was being given to the younger Asuna. The former slave had not looked forward to her discovering his wings so soon, and feared she would make a scene, or be too curious or hands-on about them.

“It is being okay, Reika. Alps is having these because he is getting stronger.” The Letai male regarded Lyat somberly as he said that. It was perhaps about as well as he had understood the previous night’s conversation, but it wasn’t that far off. He had more energy, and that’s why he had them. Reika would be able to respect more strength too. Lyat was bright for having said it, that was as simple and concise an explanation as could have been given.

“Bone is liking them, so Reika is liking them. Where is food?” She then turned and left. Alps was a little surprised in how little fuss the normally over-the-top Reika made of them. The only one Alps was worried about delicately showing them to while on the boat was Nita. The scent of frying meat had followed the investigating Reika into the cabin, so he suddenly had food on his mind, and stood up.

“I think food is a good idea.” Alps stated, and took the sisters both by the hand. Lyat left behind his sister and the rest followed up on deck, then to the aft sub-deck where the food was being prepared. The morning was warming nicely, and the breeze above deck refreshed Alps as much as he assumed breakfast would. He had feared that at least on the boat there would be little to eat, but for the first day, they had eaten well. He assumed it would be less and less as time went on, so he vowed to enjoy it while he could.

Breakfast was briefly interrupted by the former slave’s arrival, and he had to explain again the essence-manifestations. Lyat’s simple explanation was more suitable, so the wolf used that, adding only a little detail when pressed. It made more sense to the others at least, and while they stared a lot at them, they did not hassle him too much about them. Alps hated being the center of attention, but he would tolerate it just until the novelty of those wings around his friends wore off. Uri and Misha joked about a new

fashion trend once everything calmed down if he were seen out and about with them in the company of the queen; a trend where male Amanians wore them elaborately to impress their potential lovers. Nita had to admit that she saw that as a distinct possible outcome, and it comforted Alps a bit to think of a time where it might be okay for him to be seen with them. He appreciated the guards for looking far forward instead of just in the grim immediate future.

Luna had already eaten and was bathing herself, so she was not present to answer questions. This was unfortunate because after food had been consumed Lira had a sustained barrage of them that Alps answered as best he could, which was not very well. She was still in a bit of shock because of all the new information that had been thrust upon her. Letai on the move, the Shadowfall broken, an impending alliance with the Asuna... it was all a large amount for her to take in.

Vhale came to retrieve some food, saw Alps, widened his eyes, and aborted his attempt to even enter the room. He just turned on his heel and left. The white wolf was aware that he made Vhale uncomfortable, so this did not surprise him. He had not shown any negative feelings toward Vhale, the former warlord seemed to furnish all those for himself. He seemed to think that Alps should hate him most of all, and would not hear any other way. After everyone had settled down about it, however, things got back to normal, more or less. Nita was unusually snuggly with him, which he didn't mind, but Lira seemed to find him fascinating. Even that eventually gave way to a regular post meal time bantering conversation. It felt nice to relax with his friends again, and it was easy in their company to forget the great task ahead for a moment.

After a while, Alps excused himself and went to do what was definitely needed the most at that point. In a small room a door down and across from where he had slept the previous night, Luna had filled a large fifty gallon barrel with sea water and warmed it using her essence. Alps needed a bath. He had expected, as social and affectionate as Nita was being, that she might have suggested joining him. This was in part why he vocally stated he intended to bathe but to his surprise she opted instead to go and take essence lessons from Luna as she had scheduled the previous day. Alps didn't mind. A relaxing soak would do him good.

Alps sighed as he walked into the small room on the boat that was used for bathing. The barrel in this room was quite wide, and deep enough to bathe while standing. For something so simple, it was always a welcome sight. He had not had to use it often, as the trips back and forth over the ocean had thankfully been few, but he used it enough to know he wanted it now, especially with the knowledge that the water was made warm by Luna. He wondered how often she had warmed a bath for him while he was but an infant, and if she considered that wistfully as she prepared the bath for him this time. Was it why she did it? Did she want to remember those days? He didn't remember them at all. After locking the door, lost in those thoughts, he turned around, and thumped his back against the door.

He was not alone. There were a few possible scenarios that he knew could play out encountering one of his friends in the bath, and normally those scenarios would not bother him, but this was one that he had certainly not hoped for.

Reika glared at the wolf from under half-closed eyes, leaning over the edge of the bath, seeming as if she wished to sink in deeper and hide herself. Her clothes were strewn about, the scent of the saltwater used for that bath high on the air since it was warm. She had intercepted the bath intended for Luna's son. Alps knew better than to scold Reika for it. She was not likely to tell it was for him, and it would have been just as inviting to her as it was to him. He could see himself out, and come back when she was done. It would likely at least still be lukewarm by that time. Alps reached for the door latch. The hyena perked up, and folded her round ears down a bit.

"Wulf stays. Is talking for Reika to enjoy." The winged lupine fluttered those new appendages with some degree of aggravation. He would rather not be caught hanging out in the bath with Reika, as it would send entirely the wrong message, but he worried that if he made her feel he was leaving out of lack of any kind of interest, she would be dishonored, and he had a lot of traveling yet to do with the hyena. He sauntered over to the tub, and leaned back against it, standing, resting his elbows as he took his place in front and just beside her outside the tub, still clothed in his trousers.

"Alright then, I stay. What would you like to talk about?" Alps asked.

"What is you thinking of Reika?" she asked. The white lupine faltered a bit, looking down at his feet. What kind of question was that? Was she concerned that he was still angry about how he was treated when he was initially abducted? Those painful times had been forgiven long ago.

"I trust you implicitly." He stated. "You are loyal, and your brother cares very deeply for you. The empress puts a lot of faith in your abilities, and I do as well. I feel safer with you around." Alps lied about the last part. Reika made him feel lots of things, but safe was not the highlight of those things.

"Alps is being good to all Asuna, even when it is dangerous. Reika likes wulfs now. Alps is strong. Wings is proving it." She reached up and strokes the feather appendages. Alps shivered a little at her touch. He was not used to Reika touching him gently. It was not unpleasant, but seemed sorely out of place. "Does Alps like Rios?" she asked, which seemed so out of the blue that he leaned forward, his nose almost touching hers when he looked to her, before looking forward, not wanting to nearly bump muzzles with her and get his head pulled off.

"Rios is very strong. She loved her people a great deal and would do anything for the survival of her friends and her race. I respect her a lot." Alps hoped that this answer would suffice. His real feelings about Rios were confusing.

"Does Alps love Rios?" Reika asked. The former slave winced. Why in the hell would she ask that? She knew he was not really able to do that.

"I am promised to Queen Razelle." He hoped to steer away from the topic altogether. Undeterred, the curious hyena continued her line of questioning.

"What if no Nita was there waiting?" She leaned forward, huffing softly in his ear.

"I don't like to think of Nita not being there." Alps answered honestly.

"Reika knows, but if not, is Rios being loved by Alps?" she asked. The wolf relented finally. She would not stop until she had the answer that she wanted.

"Perhaps. She has a lot of the same qualities that make me love Nita. I don't see why not. But if I were to lose Nita, I don't think I could love another the same. You might understand if you fall in love so deeply." Alps wanted to make it clear that Nita not making it through the journey was not an offer of himself to Rios.

"Alps is enjoyed being with Rios, though, yes? Is feeling so good, holding and being inside?" Her questions again disarmed the wolf. He folded his ears back and looked at the floor, blushing. Why would she ask that. She was there for the first time that it happened, and ensured her empress carried his child. The first time he did not enjoy it, but then he did. It was part of his confusion about the powerful and rather demanding empress.

"It feels wonderful, Reika." He wondered why she was asking those questions. She huffed softly behind his ear.

"Did Reika feel wonderful too?" she asked, her voice crackling a little. Alps perked his ears a bit. Why did she sound so anxious?

"Y... Yes. You felt very good. I did not expect you to do that. It was so sudden. And very effective." He was not outright glad she did it, but at the time, he remembered that it was everything he wanted in that moment, since he had been fighting off his climax so he could fake bursting in Rios.

"Reika knows. She is counting. Wolf makes it twenty-seven counts. Then he gives to Asuna everything, and is very hot." Her voice raised at the last part, and she murmured, "Reika liked it too." Alps felt his cheeks go scarlet. He had suspected that she did that because she was ordered to and would gladly carry out any order. Perhaps at the time she did, but she was anxiously telling him at that moment that she liked it.

"I am..." Alps thought hard about what to say. "... I am glad. I worried that you were forced to and resented me for it." He wanted to seem appreciative that it was not a bad memory.

“Reika is having to, and maybe does not like idea before, but is loving to think of it now. Talk to Reika? Tell is how you feel when Rios is doing those things, and then Reika... Tell about it honestly.” Her voice wavered a little, making Alps feel that she might have really been stressing out about how he felt about it all this time. He decided it would be a good idea to let her know that he was not hurt by the alarming experience.

“R-Rios being on me made me fearful at first. I knew what she wanted, and I could not give it to her. I was afraid that Nita would not want me back if I did. So I resisted. I tried to relax, but she was so hot, and so tight around me, sliding up and down like a perfectly form fitting glove. I felt like she could not be any more perfectly shaped to hold me inside her, and every stroke felt like a tightly undulating wet hand stroking me, eager for what I had been trained to give to my queen. Every part of me was willing and desperate to give her what she wanted but my troubled heart and mind.” The white canine blushed deeper, holding his ears back as he felt himself becoming aroused. He was pretty sure that Reika could not see him from where she was behind him.

“Then?” she asked with a little anxious puff of breath.

The realization hit Alps hard. He had walked in on her as she was already thinking about these things in the tub. He had caught her pleasuring herself to those memories of him, and she was getting off on him telling her how it felt to him. He had not really considered Reika in such a light, and knew becoming involved with her in that fashion would have been unpredictable and dangerous, but if he were to just walk out as if disgusted, she would be impossible to travel with. Another thing that he became immediately aware of because he suddenly focused on it... was that he could feel her pleasure in his wings, a soft, very pleasant tingling sensation, like being gently caressed in just the right soothing, loving way.

“Then...” Alps pondered continuing. What would happen? What might she desire? Would she be content to pleasure herself? She seemed to be hiding it. The sudden quiet pause let the wolf become aware of something else. A light thunk-thunk-thunk from inside the tub. Alps perked his tall lupine ears again. Her knuckles rapping the front of the wooden tub? Her hips were back a bit.

“Please... huhh... Tell Reika...” She was growing impatient. Alps closed his eyes. It certainly could not do too much harm.

“I felt her pulling me inside her, suckling me with her body. I wanted to just let go so bad.” He made sure to speak in such a fashion that was more descriptive as he suspected she desired to hear as she masturbated behind him. He continued to look away as if actually unaware.

“Yes...” The hyena’s scent was masked by the warm saltwater in the tub.

“Twice... No... Maybe three times...” Alps continued, “... I thought I really was going to cum, but she slowed to talk to me, to encourage me, and that was enough to let me slip back from the brink. I think she would scold herself if she knew how close I came to just surrendering and apologizing to Nita later.”

“But then Reika would not be needing to help.” She panted. “Is better way we did yes...” She gave a gentle and tense squeak. Alps jerked slightly, actually feeling the pulse through his wings. “Keep telling Reika...” she said in a shivering whisper.

“O-okay...” Alps murmured, feeling his cock swelling so tight in his trousers. Why was it so alluring having her masturbating behind him? “.. Anyway.. Uh... Yes, she came close to making me burst inside her a couple times, so I decided I had to go ahead and let her think she succeeded. Surely she was able to tell how close she had me. It would be believable, right?” Reika panted faster, and the thumping became a bit louder. It seemed too hard to be her knuckles alone. Did she have one of Nidaja’s brushes in the tub? Alps blushed scarlet at the thought of one of those smooth-handled wooden-brushes pistoning in and out of Reika’s tight sex.

“She is not falling for it... Please, what next?” the desperate-sounding and potentially violent girl asked. Alps knew what she wanted to hear about.

“She slipped off of me, panting from her release, and seemed satisfied. I thought I was in the clear. I was going to really have to stroke myself off though... maybe spend myself all over the sheets, however hard it was going to be. That took everything I could muster to keep from spilling it all inside her.” Another squeak from Reika and Alps felt another hard throb through his wings. She nearly climaxed. Oh, if the wings let him tell so clearly, he could be dangerous in bed with his lovers from this point on! He continued. “then I felt your mouth around me, Reika.”

“Yeessss...” Her melting tone was so grateful. “Tell Reika is how it feels...” Surely she did not think the wolf was still unaware. The loud thumping had sped up a bit, and he knew what she wanted. He gave it gladly, no longer having any reservations about making her cum in the tub.

“You began stroking me in your perfect mouth, just short enough, tongue just wide enough, and I needed it so bad too. I wanted to cum and I thought I might not get to, maybe not for days. I ached from it, and you stroked me so perfectly. And then, I just gave in. What harm could it do? You would get a surprise, but you wanted a taste. I gushed for you, Reika.. I filled your mouth... I sprayed every drop of my seed on your tongue, and you held it there, a gift for your empress...”

Thunk thunk thunk THUNK THUNK! Thunk! Reika stopped thumping and gave a rushing breath of a long shivering moan, and Alps felt satisfied pleasure all through those new feathery appendages, and a faint sensation in his tummy that he recognized from when he had switched forms with Nidaja. He could feel the actual sensation, however light, of Reika’s climax. The wings put him in far closer contact with the

essence of others. He would have to be careful just what they allowed him to feel. It stunned him a bit, and she melted a little into the tub. Alps turned around and slipped his trousers off. She would certainly not refuse to let the wolf in the tub with her after that, and he wanted to feel the warm water over him, given how much he ached. Maybe she would even taste him again. He thought he might rather like to allow it.

She did not protest at all as she hung over the edge of the tub. Alps slipped in and caressed the hyena, who panted softly, gratefully. Alps stood behind her, stroking her back. The short, strong Asuna was quite lovely to look at, he had not considered any attraction to the stocky girl until that moment, but there was no denying it. Her energy also felt wonderful flowing through him.

"Closer to Reika... so she is touching..." She moved a hand behind herself from the edge of the tub. Alps brought his hips forward, thinking carefully to try to remember if he locked the door. This would be hard to explain to a few of those on the boat. Like her brother. Alps groaned happily as strong, but pleasantly gentle fingers wrapped around his girth and began lovingly stroking him in a milking, lusty fashion. He put his hands on Reika's shoulders, standing behind her, letting her stroke him off.

"You liked it too, then?" he asked.

"Reika is learning to like lots." She huffed. Her hand sped up a little, and her fingers turned and twisted around his throbbing organ. He was surprised at how ready he was, but he leaned over her back, fluttering his wings a little subconsciously. "You feel good in Reika's hand... Is fun be doing this to wulf." Alps closed his eyes, the act of breaking a taboo always a fast way to bring him to his peak, and he was not trying to hold back. "You is forgiving Reika. Is making her happy."

"I'll cum..." Alps huffed, a warning that came right as he considered that their bath was about to be for nothing. Their fur would be gummed up terribly between the saltwater bath and the sticky wolfseed. His worries about spoiling their fur were suddenly squelched as Reika pushed her hips back and took Alps fully inside her. He could remember telling himself no, he didn't want to do that, but the next moment, his back was arched, the water was splashing violently, and he was fucking Reika for everything he could muster!

The hyena was beyond a doubt delighted. Alps gritted his teeth tightly. What was he doing? Surely this was not healthy to do to the somewhat insane girl? But the next few seconds found her pushed hard to the front of the barrel, and a hot cry from her sent that little shockwave through her unexpected lover's wings, and then hot, heavy torrents blasted away at her cervix as Alps pushed as deep as he could, getting a very positive-sounding groan from Reika.

Alps stopped, and rested against her back, still writhing with pleasure as he felt her just squeezing rhythmically around his cock. That was more risk than he should have been taking. He was not confident about the hyena's ability to handle such a

complicated concept as a sexual relationship with someone not even in the same culture as her. Still, making her feel good made him feel good all the same. Reika let him stay like that a bit longer before turning around, planting a soft kiss on his muzzle, and smiling greedily at him.

“Is good being closer friend to wulf. Is making Reika feel better about scary places she will see with good friend wulf.” Alps looked into her eyes, feeling blissful, but philosophical.

“Are you ready to face the unthinkable things we will? Even I am not so sure we will make it.” He stretched against the back of the tub and gazed at her naked body. What the hell had he allowed himself to do?

“Reika is thinking that Alps and Reika’s new friends is supposed to be on journey together. Is not knowing why, but with all together, is feeling right. Maybe not all supposed to make sense until the end, but is feeling like is the right thing, all things we do. Maybe if we is keeping to feeling right, is going to be okay. Even if we is not realizing victory, Reika is never ever regretting going on impossible journey with her friends. Is happier to die in this than to be in mines of death for horrible Avatar. All Asuna is happier to be with Amani Queen on trip, and being closer and closer to friends who is sooner dying than betraying. Is luckiest life even if short. Reika is glad, Alps. Reika is glad for all things with you.” The white wolf listened to the normally chaotic girl’s lengthy explanation. He widened his eyes. It was the most lucid and sensible and valiant thing he had heard her say, and far more than he thought her to be capable of. Perhaps he should lay her more frequently, it just might have been good for her!

“Thank you Reika.” Alps said, feeling genuinely closer to her. “I feel the same way. I think this is a good feeling that we have, and I hope that while our journey is successful...” he leaned in and embraced the hyena, “... that it is maybe not... too short.” Reika giggled at that and placed a gentle kiss upon the bridge of Alps’ muzzle, before crawling out of the barrel to dry. Alps watched her dry rather smugly, not feeling as bad about what he had just done. Perhaps Reika was not really as odd and crazy as he had believed?

As if cued by Alps’ consideration, she reached into the barrel where she had been standing and pulled Bone, her club and very best friend, out of the water. Alps recoiled. Had he been in the water the entire time? Then his mind truly derailed. The hard thinking on the inside of the barrel... She had been thrusting Bone in and out of her sex as hard as she could while Alps talked to her. She had sex with her fully sentient bone club with the wolf right there at her side! Alps gazed at her emptily. No, she was just as crazy as he thought she was. He could not even speak with the realization that he had just enjoyed a three-way with Bone.

“Thank you Alps. Reika loves you. We is making it together, you see. We are being stronger.” With that, she pulled on her skirt and top, despite being mostly wet, and she and her befucked bone club walked out of the shower, leaving a sated but

creeped out wolf alone with his most distressing thoughts. The door closed behind her, Alps squeaked out,

“I need a new bath to wash off the crazy.”

It had been raining for the better part of the morning, in a very grey and drenching fashion, leaving Lunar is a bit of cover in which to work. Leal and Ceriss were already in place “guarding” the queen’s rural cottage. There was more work to do, however. He pushed his way into one of the less reputable establishments, a hush falling over the patrons as the leather-cloak-clad black-furred wolf dripped on the dirty wood floor, the water spilling through the aged and unsteady slats into a dank basement filled with the foulest beers money could ignore. This place would be perfect.

They were hushed because Lunar is did nothing to disguise himself. One of the captains of the guard walking into a known den of thieves did not open for much dialogue, and a few of the patrons scooped away money, contraband, or just their belongings in preparation to leave. Lunar is glared at the room with an appreciation for where he was. He pulled a bottle to his lips, drinking from it heavily, spilling a good portion of the potent alcohol on himself, then staggered into the room. While he was not drunk, the intentional spilling and his intentional wavering made it appear that he was.

“How about this place, eh? I’m not *about* to get chunked outta here! I kin drink all I want here, right? Cause no one here’s about to say what I can’t do cause I got warrants for like half of ya! Bring me drinksh, and a stool, maybe a girl, and we will just act like I’m not even here!” He spoke far louder than needed, and stumbled over to a table, before just sitting on it, right between to people that were probably discussing something that they could have been arrested for. They glared at him. “Fuck off, my table, bish.” He huffed alcoholically at the female member of this party. Both got up and chose a different table. A barman moved quickly over to him, and replaced his bottle with something inferior, making a point to stow his more expensive fare behind the counter, as he rather expected.

He pretended to get very into the awful dredge that he was served, spilling more than drinking, but he was paying, so he doubted they would care. He poorly sang a few words of some song, and added on words from another with the same misshapen melody of the first, and eventually, people sat back down, assuming he had been thrown out of nicer places and washed up there, unlikely to remember even being there. How far a captain could fall if given the right drink. He watched the patrons for a while, finally noticing someone who did not belong. A rather reserved lady, gaunt, hungry-looking, but well dressed and eager-looking with deep grey fur sat in a corner with three accomplices, watching him with obvious irritation. It was not their conversation he was interested in, Lunar is could not hear it. It was their clothing. They all wore some combination of deep blue and gold. The colors of the Spirits of Silverlight. It had taken

a couple of locations, but he found them. It was not likely to be all of them, and making a move on them here would be playing his hand too soon. He was there as part of the plan, not the result of it.

Lunaris watched the other patrons a while, trying to decide the most organic way of making his plan work. He spilled more drink on him, toxically soaked in the stuff already. His outfit would scarcely be reusable after this mess. Finally, he found an avenue he did not expect, but knew would work perfectly.

“Neit, you ponderously ineffective shneakthief! In mah lap!” He indicated where he wanted the girl. The tan-furred lean and small former burglar stood bolt upright and gritted her teeth. Her dark green cloak obscured her dainty form well enough, but her hood was on her shoulders, so she was easily recognizable. She looked at Lunaris, wide-eyed in disbelief. Surely he could not be talking to him. “Watsh wif the delay, cur? Yew wanna shtay offa the wanted poshter yesh?” Lunaris intentionally forced his ears to move different from one another, which he actually could not have done if he were drunk, but made him look a lot more drunk.

“Uh... Uh, I think you have me confused with someone else, mister.” Neit politely backed slowly toward the door.

“Even shmashed, I kin catch yew and shake yew worsh than Nidaja did, shlut, git in mah lap!” he barked severely, enough that she stopped dead in her tracks. Lunaris could see the horror in her eyes. Even if she ran, he would just use it as an excuse to go into a drunken tirade to get his point across. He was a little surprised to see her turn and come over to him where he sat on the table.

“Maybe get into a chair like a proper adult, Captain Lunaris.” Her words had a lot of bite to them, showing that she was not happy with this turn of events. Lunaris smiled at her lopsidedly, and then slipped into a chair, then onto the floor, then clamored his way back up into his chair. He then patted his lap. The former thief flumped down onto his thighs, and sighed. Lunaris pulled her short ponytail so her ear was right by his lips.

“Good girl!” he barked raspily, but then, in a barely perceptible whisper, “... *play along...*” She gritted her teeth, and he let go of her ponytail. “How are yew enjoying the good life, girl?” he asked. “... Nice not having to be on those postersh anymore, huh? You gotta pay a while for that, though. You knew that right?” he asked.

“I figured.” Neit growled softly at Lunaris, doing as she was asked. While he was not going to actually take advantage of her, she was actually somewhat indebted to the royal family for her pardon, and had extended the intent to help them when possible. She had given up her life of crime, but still depended on her network of contacts in the world she was leaving behind until she could figure out what she wanted to do with her life. Being on a wanted poster did not make you very appealing as an apprentice, even after you have been removed from them.

"I should take you to Castle Diera." The black-furred brute growled. "I wanna fuck you right on the queensh own bed, won't that be fun?" he laughed.

"I rather think her majesty would be appalled, Lunaris." Tia tensed a bit, and the captain smiled at her squirming. She was actually visualizing what he spoke of in his ruse. He was surprised to see that it got to her.

"You think? Maybe she walksh in and you are shtill tied to all four poshts, splattered with the lust of a guard captain and half the guard staff from two days of heavy use, won't that be a shock?" There was roaring laughter from those in the tavern. Almost everyone was listening to this exchange. Neit would probably not be able to show her face in this place again, ever. The sort of wording he was using and the scandalous subject matter was sure to get attention. He didn't want to avoid it though. He wanted all ears on him.

"Lunaris, I think she would find us before two days had passed. She has to sleep too, you know." Neit seemed dumbfounded as to what the dark wolf was up to. He grinned and spilled more drink on himself and his lap-sitting hostage.

"Pshhhh... Naw. For the next two nights she'sh still at her cottage north of here. Plenty of time to wreck her room. You don't git to shay no to thish." He laughed. There was a cumulative oooohhhh from around the room. Lunaris half-glanced to the table occupied by the Spirits of Silverlight. They were suddenly very, very interested.

"Well, you will at least not have too many guards to help you splatter my fur, as you say." Neit said, seeming to relax a little, though she was still obviously completely confused as to what in the world Lunaris was thinking or doing with this.

"She hash Nidaja with her. She and a couple other guards are all she needs for that place. No one goes and bothers her there. Not if they don't want to deal with a pished off Nidaja. She doesn't like their vacations interrupted." He said this with one eye darting back to the group he was watching. They began yammering back and forth like crazy, their faces lighting up with delight. Package delivered! He scooped up Neit, who squeaked in surprise, and he headed for the door.

"Wait! I don't want to go with you, you are filthy drunk! At least wait until you are - OW!" He walked her head right into the door-frame of the tavern, getting another roar of laughter from the patrons who were not likely to let her forget that she had to deal with that. With that, the door slammed behind him, and they were out in the rain. She looked at him with a sour expression.

"Thank you, Neit." Lunaris spoke without the slur of his voice. The scent was still there, but he was obviously sober.

"What the hell was the use of all that?" she asked, crossing her arms, still draped in Lunaris' cradling hold.

“Planting information.” The black wolf looked serious again, regarding the younger thief. She widened her eyes and then folded back her ears. She was very bright, so it didn’t take more than that to give her the news.

“The queen’s in danger. Oh heavens, who would dare?” she asked.

“I am deputizing you, Neit. Welcome to the royal guard.” He began walking away from the castle, toward the cottage he spoke of. She struggled a little in his arms.

“Lunaris, I can’t fight, look at me! I’m a sneak, not a warrior.” She protested, kicking her legs a bit, still talking in a tone so hushed that it could hardly be heard above the din of the rain as it washed the smell of alcohol off the guard captain.

“None of us have the luxury of saying that now, Neit.” He said with deep sincerity. “I need a sneak. You are coming with me.” Without another word, the former thief was carried off into the night, another stage of the plan set.

Alps sighed softly and leaned against the edge of the tub. Reika had gone to find her belongings, where she apparently kept the dye used to meticulously repaint Bone’s features after his bath. He shook his head a bit, considering the relationship between the girl and her club, but dismissed the thought. Bone could talk to her. He was a friend to her. Why would she not fall in love? It made more sense than some of the other relationships he had seen. Alps was allowing himself to dry with the slatted shuttered window wide open, a warm sea-breeze wafting in. He rubbed his fur thoroughly, making dusty salt fall from his fur, the expected side-effect of sea-water bathing. When he looked back up, he nearly fell backwards.

As he toweled off in the nude, Ellis stood before him. He gritted his teeth. There was no way she had gotten in without opening the door. Had she been there the whole time? Had she seen what he did with Reika? He stared at her, wide-eyed. She finally broke the awkward silence herself.

“Interesting choice in fashion.” She gave a nod to the wolf. The black fox was adorned in her usual black and silver robes, but she seemed to wear some kind of mesh under it that covered her chest up to her neck where it had been bare, and sleek and narrow, elegant-looking pauldrons upon her shoulders. The mesh was visible over her upper arms where the opening of the sleeves had allowed the robes to breathe before. The outfit made her look far more regal, and he wondered where exactly she had obtained it. He did not remember seeing anything like it in the castle, but he had not exactly pried through the closets, either. Did it belong to Nita? The two had the same build. Nita would have likely shared with the fox given circumstances of her arriving after 700 years with nothing. The gold clasp at the collar of the outfit which helped hold

the pauldrons in place looked similar to the clasp on his uniform, so he assumed it was given to her by the queen.

“You have an interesting addition to your outfit as well.” He remarked.

“A little more protection. Where we are going, we are going to need it.” The fox spoke of their mission with a grim tone. Alps felt his heart sink. Even mysterious Ellis was concerned.

“We did not pack much in the way of armor for me.” Alps suddenly wondered why Nidaja had not considered that.

“You are not trained to wear it. It would inhibit and endanger you.” The fox answered his unspoken question uncannily. “You have Ressaia. It will serve you better than armor, I assure you.” Alps looked over at his hip-pouch where the metallic green sphere that shifted to a staff was kept. It was a strange Letai relic which seemed to block essence attacks, or diffuse them, or just negate them, he was not sure. It was helpful already, but he wanted to know more.

“We will be going against the Uruk. They don’t typically attack using spells. Are you saying we will encounter people who do?” he asked.

“We may, but do not discount the staff’s use against even the Uruk. It will not break, and a weapon is a weapon. When you learn its effectiveness, and remember the things life has taught you already... it will make you an enemy the Uruk never wanted.” Alps considered that a bit, the tone she used always so cryptic. Why not just tell him exactly how to use the weapon. Or even train him to fight? The fact that Ressaia was a stick was a little ironic to Alps since it had been the implement that Nidaja had taught him to use long ago, and the weapon he was most comfortable with. Was that chance, or did Ressaia form what Alps could use? Would it have been different in Ellis’ hands? What weapons would such a wise and crafty fox use?

“You have said little of my wings.” He finally noted, a little surprised by that. She did not even see to care.

“They make you look more effeminate. Now the boys will want you too.” Her words jarred Alps almost right back into the bath. That was not in the least what he expected to hear. She was smiling though, which was something that he did not see her do often. He sighed and shook his head.

“I should get rid of them, yes? I should let Luna help me remove them?” The expression on Ellis’ face hardened a bit.

“I am unsurprised because it’s not the first time I have seen them, but I do not think that your mother was clear with you on how rare essence manifestations actually are. I would not be so hasty to be rid of such a gift if I were you, Aris.” The white-furred

wolf widened his eyes at that. It was incredibly rare that Ellis gave advice that was not a seed planted by means of questions or some other round-about means of arriving at the conclusion himself. Did she feel strongly about the wings?

“She didn’t say that they were that rare, and she seemed to know what caused them. Was she wrong? Are they not just manifestations of having drawn too much essence?” he asked. The fox was quiet a moment, gazing at Alps as he fluttered his wings a little in reminder for her to speak. He didn’t mean to, it just seemed they expressed his emotions almost as well as his ears or eyes did.

“She was correct in what gave them form, but short-sighted on their potential value, Alps. She told you they would do you no harm, yes?” The fox gazed intently at the wolf.

“She said they were harmless, yes.” He replied a bit tensely. The fox knew something. Why didn’t she just tell him?

“They are of no burden, and may yet have a use. Part with them if you are so vain, but what logic would tell you that having extra essence energy is a bad idea where you are going? Will you scold yourself if you need that power later?” Alps gritted his teeth a little at that.

“I don’t know any techniques to really use the energy though.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Have any you would like to teach me?”

“I already have. You will figure it out. But before you get rid of those wings, I wish for you to consider something.” The fox leaned in close to Alps, who suddenly felt extremely naked. She had not shown any interest in him before, had this now changed?

“Yes?” Alps whispered.

“Where are Luna and Ceriss’ wings?” Alps held still at that question. His mother was a High Priestess. She was immensely powerful. She was a valued healer during times of war. She was capable of blocking fireballs from Nita, pinning Vhale to a wall, and other great feats, and yet, she had no wings.

“I have more essence...” Alps mused quietly.

“Your mother is perplexed, Aris. She knows this.” The queen’s young lover wavered a bit. Why did so much focus have to be on him?

“Why do you know so much about it? What makes you so wise, Ellis?” Alps asked in a whisper.

"I only listen, Aris." He was getting used to hearing his name used, but it seemed to only feel natural from Luna or the fox.

"You listen? To who?" he asked.

"Your mother discussed those wings after breakfast. I overheard."

"Vhale." Alps remembered the dark-furred wolf turning and padding out suddenly upon seeing them.

"She can still remove them?" Alps asked.

"She believes that she can." Ellis stated.

"Will she?" he murmured.

"If you wish it." The fox leaned back again, away from him.

"What should I do?" Alps asked boldly. She was advising him, he would hear her advice.

"I already told you what you should do." Alps flattened his ears at that. She had suggested why he might want to keep them, but she had not said which was the right choice.

"What should I do?" he asked again, a bit more stern.

"Defeat the Avatar." Ellis said just as sternly, her eerie white eyes narrowing. Alps said nothing, but focused on her, not looking away. He stared at her in silence for a while, steeling his courage not to look away this time. For a while, they stood frozen in time that way. Finally, Ellis spoke. "Why do you stare so? I told you what it is you should do."

"After you lay down such a stark command, Ellis, I always look away to consider it. When I look back up, you are gone. Not this time. I am going to watch you turn around, walk over to the door there, put your hand on the handle, twist it the correct direction, pull the door open, walk into the hall, and pull the door closed, just like every other real person does." He had been dwelling on it quite a bit. Others saw her so she was not imaginary, but it was far too uncanny how she was able to come and go so silently.

"And if I do not wish for you to see me leave?" she asked.

"Oh, I am going to see you leave." Alps grinned knowingly. He had her this time. He would win this tiny little victory.

“Silly wolf pup... you entertain me so.” Her words echoed in his mind, as if he had heard it a million times before. His eyes widened, and he looked at her brightly smiling face. She had the most beautiful smile he had ever seen, and seemed so confident and happy in that moment.

“Aris? Aris, don’t sleep in the tub, you could drown, love.” His mother’s voice pulled at him, and he looked up, the world suddenly jarring and blurry, his position having changed in the room in that instant. He was leaning back in the barrel, arms over the back, the water a lot cooler and his toes feeling very pruned, telling him he had been in the water a while. The fox, of course, had gone. He was dreaming. She left without him seeing her. He flattened his ears. That was utterly impossible. Was it real? He looked up, seeing Luna standing before him with a towel. He blushed a bit.

“I was ... dreaming?” he asked.

“Perhaps. Come on out, get dry. Lira says she can alter your clothing to fit your wings, she just needs to take some measurements. You might have them a little longer after all. We are ahead of schedule because of a nice tailwind. No worries, it will be fine.” Alps crawled out of the tub, and began drying himself. He had been in there a while. He had actually been dreaming, but did that mean that the conversation was not real?

“We are not ahead of schedule. You spoke with Vhale about the wings, and neither of you think it’s a good idea to get rid of them just because they make me uncomfortable.” Luna looked away, her eyes widened.

“This is true... but... how would you have known that, Alps? Did Vhale tell you already? I thought he went to get some food while you were in the bath.” Alps shook his head softly.

“I am only figuring things out. They stay for now, mother. Perhaps we will find a use for them after all. You all trust me. I can certainly trust you.” He fluttered his wings a bit, and they glowed softly in the lamp-light. The conversation was real. What was Ellis?

Sirius, Book IV

A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 5

The trip had been rather uneventful for the second night. This left Alps some time to do something he had not had the luxury of doing since returning to the castle with Nidaja. Nothing. The wolf decided to fill this vacuum of his time by talking with his friends, as the more time he had alone, the more time he had to fret about how dangerous the course of action left to him actually was. He knew Nita and Nidaja were discussing political things with Lyat, which bored him greatly, and Lira was quietly creating a course to follow once they were on land and did not need to be disturbed. Vhale had kept himself hidden for the most part after getting aboard because he was trying to avoid any attention from Lira who still didn't know exactly who he was, and he seemed to still feel badly about Alps' link to him. Still, finding someone to talk to was not hard. He found Reika and Luna up on the deck. Alps was a bit confused at finding those two talking as he had always felt his mother to be very sensible and calm; Reika, not so much. As if to further illustrate how *not* alike the two were, Bone was present. The now winged wolf felt his capillaries open in his ears and the bridge of his muzzle as he remembered Reika's enjoyment of the weapon earlier that day. His blush was not solely because of what he caught the girl doing, but because it was actually Luna holding the weapon.

"Aris, come here." she commanded. The lupine shook his embarrassment and looked reverently to his mother and nodded, padding over to the hyena and priestess and flittering his wings curiously before consciously stopping them. He was trying to avoid moving them without meaning to as it would be obvious even with a cloak on if he pumped them like that. He still wore his dark-colored uniform, but the top had been altered by Lira to allow for his wings, which he appreciated.

"Yes?" he asked, happy to be so openly invited to conversation, even if he did not expect them to be having one. This would take his mind off of how weird things had become. Luna chimed,

"I need you to talk to Bone." Alps gritted his teeth. Perhaps it wouldn't. The fact that it seemed sentient was eerie enough to the wolf, but the thought of actually purposefully conversing with the item made him feel a little shy. He knew little about it, but what he did know suggested a link that only he and Reika

seemed to share, and he didn't understand having that in common with her. He had done his best not to think of it.

"I am not sure what I would say to him." the white former slave said softly.

"I need to verify that his mind is independent from Reika's, not an extension of it. I don't sense any essence at all from him."

"I do." Alps stated bluntly. "It's the same essence I sensed that allowed me into the Shadowfall. I know that's not good news." Luna's son sat on one of the crates tied against the starboard side of the ship. "Nidaja already verified that I could understand him." The priestess nodded to that curtly and spoke up again.

"Verified with Reika present. I need to be sure that Bone can say things that Reika does not know about. So, you can translate for me, and I will ask a few questions of him through you, since you are less biased toward Bone. No offense Reika."

"Reika is offended." The hyena crossed her arms.

"Sorry." Luna responded, seeming to not worry about the potentially violent girl at all. Alps reached out for Bone. Reika handed him the weapon with the silly eyes painted on it. Immediately, Alps was able to feel the cold, alien essence flowing through it. With practice, he had become more and more sensitive to it. He was far more in tune with that essence than the last time he had held the weapon. He wondered if it was because of the wings. Then came the voice.

"Greetings again." The sound was distant and whispered, but invitingly friendly. In a noisy place, Alps wondered if he would even notice it. "I had hoped I would get to talk with you again. Reika speaks highly of you now. You make a good impression. Your wings look dashing."

"Does he speak with you?" Luna asked.

"Yes." Alps answered.

"Reika, first a question for you." The white-furred female leaned forward a bit. "What is Bone to you?" The hyena girl seemed immediately confused and flustered.

"He is very best friend. Always can trust him. Always with Bone." Alps arched his brow a bit at how flustered she got about it. He had assumed with how she carried on in the tub the girl did not really consider it taboo, but perhaps she guarded that closeness a little more than he had assumed.

“No, I mean, what is he? What kind of creature does Bone tell you he is?” Luna spelled out her question a little more carefully to the younger girl, as she didn’t speak the Amanian language very well.

“Oh. Bone is a bone, you are seeing him there.” Her answer was matter-of-fact and short.

“I mean, is he a spirit haunting the bone? Is he connected to it from somewhere else?” Alps immediately got a better idea of why his mother was doing this. The priestess was justifiably worried that Bone might be a spy of some sort for the avatar. It made perfect sense that she would try quickly to ascertain this.

“Reika is not asking this. Bone is Reika’s friend, he is saying so. It is okay, he is helping Reika when parents are gone.” The hyena seemed to understand where the questioning was going as well.

“Alps, ask Bone *where* he is.” Luna asked.

“Bone is in Alps’ hand, see?” Reika announced this simply. The male lupine knew that Reika was not daft, she was likely just fearful that saying much would incriminate her long-time friend. The essence around the weapon rippled a bit and Alps heard the words from him in that steady whisper.

“This is a wise question that she asks. She is right to wonder. I have tried before to explain to the girl, but she does not quite have a grasp of such things. I will admit it’s hard not to be excited about being in contact with others.” Alps sighed softly.

“He’s a bit excited to be talking to more people, and says you are wise to ask that question, but that Reika has not understood the answer in the past.” He worried that this would not be helpful, and worried more that the ultimate response would be that Bone was a danger to the mission. Reika would not take leaving him behind very well at all.

“Then ask him where he is.” Luna clarified.

“He heard you before.” Alps stated.

“That’s not comforting.” Luna said in a hushed tone. Perfect for spying, Alps understood her concern.

“I am not sure this will make much sense to you either...” the whisper lilted in his ear, “... I am in a place that is between all the places one can go. It’s a very large place with very large creatures and impossibly small creatures. It would be insurmountably perilous to you or Reika. It is home to many dark

things and many light things, and a great deal of dangerous struggle in between. Wide enough is this world that great separation is possible and conflict can often be avoided, but in your world, conflict with something from this world would be both inevitable and disastrous.” Alps gritted his teeth at that explanation. Bone was more forthcoming and wise than he thought he would be, but the tone of what he said was not encouraging. He repeated this to Luna.

“Alright... Bone...” she seemed reluctant to refer to it with a name. “Do you know the peril we currently face? Have you learned of this in this journey already?” Alps held the weapon in both hands as she spoke, and the essence around it rippled again.

“I am aware, a bit. You may already be contending with such a disaster as I have suggested. Something may have slipped through from this harrowing place, to your more ordered and less chaotic existence. This unfortunate fact has led to much suffering, I fear.” Alps felt a sudden chill run through him. His suspicions about Bone’s link were becoming more obvious. He repeated this to Luna. Reika seemed perturbed.

“So, crazy dark thing that is taking Vhale’s place, is coming from Bone’s country?” Alps nodded to her, realizing that her understanding was still very simplistic. That was, however, basically what he understood that to mean. Luna obviously understood it too.

“So you are from the Nether...” She leaned back a bit against the railing of the ship, seeming heavy-hearted about that. “This is dangerous. How do we know that you can be trusted?”

“Reika knows, for what that’s worth.” The voice seemed to guess that it would not hold a lot of weight. To Alps, however, it did hold some weight. It was hard for the wolf to place, but Bone’s presence, while eerie, lacked any kind of malice.

“There’s no way to really know.” Alps stated, “However, if Reika believes he does not intend harm, I would side with her. She’s had Bone a while, and his ... influence has been helpful, not harmful. Reika under the influence of someone who meant harm would not have such strong loyalties to her friends.” Reika nodded emphatically.

“You can trust Bone. He is being a good friend for years to Reika.” she barked insistently. Alps could feel the tension go up.

“Where did you find Bone, Reika?” the priestess asked. The girl hyena looked up to her and frowned, obviously worried already that Luna might not want Bone to come with them after such a revelation.

“Asuna is finding him in the sand, in big desert near where sand is made hard by great fire. Reika thinks he will make a good club, five years before now. Then he speaks with Asuna, and it is comforting worries. They is always comforting Reika, who is being upset because mama and papa is not coming back.” She tried to explain in a way that painted him in the best possible light.

“Bone, why do you speak through this ... item?” Luna asked. Alps raised an eyebrow. That was a pretty sensible question.

“It was once a part of me. I was pulled into your world briefly, and slipped back mostly into my world before the door I wandered through closed.” Alps widened his eyes at that. The books that he had read in the Asuna capital had spoken of those who experimented with Nether Essence accidentally pulling horrible things through which caused all kinds of problems. This creature had been one of those things, it seemed, but wished to go back instead. Alps repeated Bone’s words.

“You slipped into this world, but you immediately went back. Why?” Luna asked. Bone responded.

“Because it is not my world. Suddenly being in a world you do not know is a problem. It can be a danger to all. To bring such danger would be needless. What if your air is poisonous? What if nothing is edible in your world for me? It is wisest to stay in a world you know.” Alps repeated Bone’s explanation. To the former slave, it was as sensible an answer as one could want. Luna rocked side to side a little, pondering this. She then spoke again.

“You say this... Bone is a part of you? You were torn apart trying to return home? You were injured?” she asked. The Asuna’s weapon responded, his drawn eyes blankly staring forward. Alps had no idea why he even looked into them. They were not really eyes. The weapon replied softly.

“Slightly, yes. I was unaware that my energy remained linked to it until someone who was sensitive to it picked it up, and I heard her voice for the first time. It was a very long time after I nearly got trapped in your world that she found it. Over time, I became more keenly aware of what was going on around that lost piece. I could see things, hear things, even smell things sometimes. I can’t see very far, and hearing is best if I am held by Alps or by Reika, but I have grown... fond of the company this link has provided. Fond of Reika.” Alps repeated all of this, to much flustering from the Asuna girl. He could not help but blush a little as well, given what he knew about the extent of that fondness.

“You healed from your injuries, I take it? What bone was this? A leg? An arm? How severe were your injuries?” The priestess was unsurprisingly concerned with things a healer might immediately be concerned with. Did Bone suffer for the loss of his limb? The implement of war answered.

"I was scarcely aware I had even been injured." Alps found that unbelievable, given the size of the bone that Reika was holding. It was twice the size of his own femur. He repeated that ridiculous claim anyway, however. Luna paused a bit, then spoke again.

"How could you be unaware? This is not a small piece. What part of you sustained this injury?" The priestess examined the bone more closely, as if trying to picture the body part it went to.

"In my escape, I lost the tip... the very last bone of my tail." Alps felt another hard, cold chill. He did not really want to repeat that. The creature Bone came from was huge. Was the creature they were intending to ultimately face just as large? Could it be even larger?

"Well?" asked Luna as Alps' mind spun with this revelation.

"That bone came from the tip of his tail." Alps repeated, his chest feeling heavy. "He barely noticed his injury at all." Luna grunted in surprise, speechless.

"Wow! Bone is big creature to Reika!" the hyena marveled, not seeming at all concerned. It seemed to actually delight her.

"What kind of creature are you, Bone?" asked Luna. The creature linked to the weapon through the essence answered.

"Your language and mine are somewhat different, and while I speak to the minds of those who hold me and can be understood, I have no way to know what creatures you know of that would be similar. At least none that I have so far seen. I am far larger than your kind, and much stronger. I have teeth and claws, I am smooth to the touch, and white in color. I have a long neck and a long tail. I have the ability to fly. I don't know how else to describe myself. To your people, I am a monster." Alps reluctantly repeated all of this, and Luna paled a bit. Reika, however, seemed almost predictably thrilled.

"Wow! You are being this great thing and never telling Reika!" she danced around a bit. Alps held the club loosely in his hands.

The journey was going to be difficult to begin with. He was travelling with the very person responsible for the dark fate that had befallen their people, an unstable hyena girl, three people who he felt obligated to protect with his life – Nidaja, Luna, and Nita, and then poor Lira, who had gotten herself in way over her head. Now he found he would be travelling in the indirect company of a monster that came from the very place as the darkness they moved to face. This gave the wolf no comfort whatsoever.

He just wanted a respectable post. He wanted to be able to tell his family that he contributed a bit more than someone who stood in a tree-level watch-post on an internal village which was more likely to suffer the misfortune of a windstorm than any hostile action. The grey-furred Leal rested his chin on his hand and gazed across the table from him as he stirred his stew with his spoon. There was a Letai Priestess. Not someone posing as one, a real one who had been trapped since before clearly recorded history. And there she was, blowing on her soup to cool it just like him. She had fur so black that he could not even make out her features very well. If it were darker he would not see her at all if it were not for the simple robes that she wore. She slowly lifted the spoon to her lips, watching him a moment. Why was she watching him? The lupine guard then cast his eyes to his dinner. She watched him because he was staring at her. He murmured softly,

“I apologize. I am sure you can understand that you and this entire surreal scenario mystify me.” He felt bad about being caught staring, but was sure she would understand it.

“That is fine.” Ceriss replied. “You are expected to deal with much, the least you should be allowed is the satisfaction of your curiosity.” She sipped from her spoon delicately.

“You use a lot of energy to disguise yourself the way you do, is that why, when you cannot be seen from outside, you have dropped the disguise?” he asked. He felt it was a bit uncanny to travel to the place openly with someone only posing to be Nita. They had pulled it off, and a few people even came to bow and offer their respect to her and wish her well. Leal had assisted in keeping folks back enough to not notice any small variations if they were so keen.

“I do. It drains me, so I will do so only when needed.” She stated.

“How about the dark-fur thing? That takes less energy?” Leal asked. He had not seen her without at least that form of disguise, leaving him with no knowledge of what her real fur might actually be like. This darkness left her feeling like a spirit or a shade, and it was very disquieting.

“It takes less, but I can do it for far longer. I prefer this color. It feels... quiet.” She nodded at her description of it. Leal rubbed his chin a bit. Of course, yes. Quiet. Because she was utterly terrifying at first glance. She sipped her soup again.

"I am honored to get to help protect you. I mean, the queen, who you will be portraying, but you as well, of course."

"You will find..." she put her spoon down, "... That a Letai priestess requires little protection, but I shall enjoy your company in this task nonetheless. As a guard, I shall make use of your eyes and ears when rest is necessary. You will be useful to me, and to this mission. Misty knew her reasons for choosing you, but perhaps not all of mine. Letai require positive-feeling energy to perform the manipulation of the essence that allows our abilities. This would be far more difficult without you and Lunar is here to draw upon. You are both strong, and you are quite young and energetic. This is useful."

Leal considered that a bit. He was not sure how much help he could be just in being present, but he was glad to help nonetheless. Ceriss continued on her soup, and Leal watched a while longer.

"Where do you think Lunar is has gotten to? It's pouring out there. I hope he is back before any of our guests show up." Leal leaned back, tilting up his bowl, sipping from it eagerly. Ceriss looked to the guard and nodded.

"He is fine. He is just spreading a rumor that the queen is barely guarded, to encourage a larger group attack. Fear of dying will ensure a smaller group of scouts takes a peek first, but Misty and Lunar are encouraging an all-out assault. The more of these traitors we can dispatch at one time, the safer the Queen will be when she gets back." The priestess explained this and took another sip.

"Will we be arresting anyone?" Leal asked.

"If we can. Information about the group will be useful, and Nidaja will be able to ... extract that when they get back."

"I wish I knew more about where they were going. It worries me to have them out of the castle during times such as this."

"Assassins are not something Nita has to worry about, trust me." Ceriss laughed, tipping up her bowl as well, as the soup had cooled enough. Leal smiled at that, encouraged a little.

"So... When the fight happens... You want me and Lunar to spread out your attackers a bit and thin their numbers? What is your plan?" Ceriss put her bowl down with a dull thump and wiped her muzzle delicately.

"Your job will be to keep them from getting away from me. They will run. We cannot have anyone make it out. Knowing I am here could cause great harm." Leal nodded at that, a bit stunned. He had no idea what a priestess

could do, but she seemed very confident. What if there were impossibly large numbers of attackers? At least the real queen was not in any danger. Their assault would expose them, and their plans would be dashed, even if Leal and Ceriss and Lunaris fell. He finished his soup in a somber mood. Ceriss spoke.

"I would not spend too much time worrying. Be confident, Leal. Know that the next day comes because you will fight for it. Know you are a part of the world, and all that happens now and what will happen later. Even if only a small part is played, you are still a part." The priestess stood up and reached her shadowy hand out for Leal's. He took it, and felt himself drawn to his feet. In a moment, he was in step alongside her, being lead through the halls of Nita's large vacation manor. She eventually led him to a large, heavy door.

"This is where the queen would sleep. You will guard me here when I rest, and Lunaris will patrol. You are okay with this?" Ceriss opened the door and led Leal in. He blinked at the size of the room. It was no smaller than the massive, luxurious room that the queen had in the castle. It looked like it took up nearly a quarter of the manor. This was definitely a place geared entirely around the queen's rest. There was a massive four-post bed with wrought-iron vine-work at the head of it, gauzy curtains spilling down from metal leaf-decorated railing at the top. There was a violet and gold carpet under the bed that spread out through half the room, and a heavy, ornate desk and a lovely wardrobe on one wall, with a second floor balcony that overlooked a dense and beautiful forest which extended down to a thin private beach in the calm and sparkling bay. Much of the manor, this room included was not made of the white marble that the castle was predominantly lined with indoors, it was made with gold-orange colored sandstone which gave the rooms a warmer, cozier earth-toned feel. Getting to stay here was as much of a treat for Leal as getting to stay in the castle, and he still could not believe that he was so privileged as to be a part of everything that was happening. He walked around the room, marveling as he looked around. He heard the door close, and looked over to Ceriss.

"It's a nice room. You have done well for yourself, your majesty." Leal stated, grinning to the priestess. She closed her eyes, smiling back, and her form shifted. There was a flicker, like lightning shining off the white cliff face of a distant mountain, and her form was different, the queen standing there before him. She nodded warmly to him.

"Much responsibility comes with a room like this, Leal." Ceriss even altered her voice, though Leal could not tell if she sounded much like the queen, he had only heard her a few times giving speeches, with her voice amplified by a spell. Still, the look was very convincing.

"Quite a bit comes with getting to see it as well, I imagine." Leal made his remark, considering the amount of trust the queen would have to have in bringing

someone in here, even though this was a false Nita. Ceriss smiled in her royal form and moved over to the bed.

“Won’t you sit down, Leal?” she asked. “You have earned the trust of the royal house, after all. You should visit in comfort.” The guard felt his face heat up. This was so wrong. Ceriss pretending to be the queen, inviting him to sit on the queen’s bed, seeming so charming and taboo. He was just a guard, he’d not have a chance with the real thing, but was it a lapse of good conscience to fantasize? Surely Ceriss knew the thought might play across his mind. The devilish grin she gave through Nita’s features as she patted the bed told him she knew. He swallowed and followed his orders, however... even if he would nearly have to have been ordered not to sit by her side. She looked so inviting.

“This would probably irritate Nita if she knew, Ceriss.” The lupine guard chuckled to the priestess as he watched her sit prim and proper on the bed.

“Aww, does this make my loyal subject feel shy?” Ceriss rumbled in a soothing and sexy version of what he imagined must have been the queen’s voice. For how spot on her appearance was, she would surely put effort into mimicking the voice too. Leal inhaled deeply.

“It feels like we are breaking some unspoken rule.” He admitted to her, looking up in Ceriss’ disguised violet eyes. She smiled playfully.

“Taboos are fun, Leal. You should relax and just allow the queen a bit of relaxation. This is her vacation home after all...” The priestess leaned in and touched her lips delicately to Leal’s. He gave a full-body shiver. Misty having him as she did was a shock to him. He would have never considered it if she had not made it so bluntly obvious what she wanted. The guard could not get over the image of his queen kissing him, and his muzzle and ears went scarlet. He finally pulled back, gasping out.

“If Lunaris walked in on this...” Leal whispered.

“Oh if only he did...” Ceriss crooned softly, her sweet-smelling breath teasing Leal’s lips a bit. She plucked the link to his cape and pulled it away from him, and then began to pull up his chainmail cuirass. He gasped out.

“Oh heavens, you *want* to get caught! I’ll be reprimanded!” The lady wolf who looked exactly like his royal highness, Nita, pouted back at him.

“Maybe it’s worth a little reprimand, Leal.” She chuckled, and he realized she was having some fun at his expense. He crossed his arms, looking forward.

“I respect Queen Razelle a great deal, and look up to her!” he protested, but he could not get the plentiful images out of his mind. He had been poisoned

by the thoughts thoroughly. The queen pushed down on the bed, pitching and moaning as Misty had done, plowed heavily by her lover. Did she experience it often? Had she ever experienced it right there on that very bed? Leal felt extremely hot, and tried to shake away a thought of the esteemed and powerful Queen Razelle on her knees before him taking hot, plentiful ribbons of his lust over her muzzle and chest. He squirmed.

“Respect or not, the thought makes you glad I took off your armor, doesn’t it?” Ceriss asked, this time in her own voice. Leal looked back to her. The inky-black hole in the world shaped as a lovely lupine female was back. Leal sighed heavily, glad of it. Such teasing. Now he would be walking around aching for Misty and he might not see her again for days. He saw the blouse of that copy of the queen’s relaxed silky outfit fall on top of his armor on the floor. His head snapped up and Leal saw more of that inky darkness. There were no intimate features to behold, but he knew the priestess to be bare under that darkness. Was she going to do more than tease him? He swallowed loudly.

In another anxious moment, she pressed Leal back and undid his trousers, the belt slipping away and his boots cast to the floor with the rest of the clothing. The pants were jerked away eagerly, and then he was bare save for his bracers. He felt ashamed at the level of arousal that Ceriss was immediately treated to, but those thoughts of the queen were intense, and so forbidden, he could not help it. He then felt dexterous, skilled hands take his masculinity, both ensnaring him, working together so gently to stroke and tease along that very thick spire.

“Mercy... Please... I did not expect this...” Leal whimpered. Surely if his captain caught him failing to observe his duties and keep watch, he would be punished. Ceriss did not seem to care... or was she still teasing him? He would certainly be able to stay awake all night and alert after being riled up so heavily.

“Do you beg for mercy already Leal? I felt for certain the Royal Guards were made of sterner stuff.” Her hands were so soft and silky and gentle, as if she were wearing gloves made just for this touch. If she were, he could not see them. She was bare save for the silky skirt of the Queen’s outfit. She was so dark, and if she were not right that moment tending to the pleasure his body was begging for, she would perhaps have been scary to look at. But all he could see at that moment was her astride, riding him, interrupted occasionally with hot flashes of his mind serving him a thought of his Queen screaming in release that he had lustfully delivered. The stroking of those palms became more lubricated, and Ceriss crooned hotly. “Oh, but those thoughts did do a number on you... pre already...” The guard shifted nervously.

“Please... We will get caught. Lunaris has a way...” Heat overtook his member, and he tensed up completely. Oh god her muzzle was pure heaven wrapped around beauty and washed wet and slick with his hottest wishes. It had

to be some kind of essence trick. Nothing felt that good. Her tongue undulated slowly against his twitching shaft, pushing him very intentionally toward a release he knew he could not prevent or control. Her mouth finally pulled off his throbbing heat and she looked sinfully in his eyes, her yellow-tinted irises tracing him with embarrassing hunger. He saw a bead of pre form at his fleshy tip, and just vanish when it ran down and met her stroking hand. It was eerie how her darkness obscured things that got close enough to her.

“Lunaris knows I intend to draw essence from you, Leal. He won’t care if he catches us.” Ceriss licked her lips, her pink tongue a stark contrast against her shadowy muzzle, white fangs briefly visible too, only making her more predatory and frightening. At the same time, it made her highly alluring. That sense of danger was playing a very masterful head game with Leal. He snapped back into focus.

“Drawing essence... Wait, this is how?” he asked, sitting up a little. He was forced back down.

“Not always, but it works quite nicely.” The priestess said breathlessly, and with that, her mouth was back over him, the lady wolf shimmying down the bed a little, hovering over Leal as she stroked up and down with her muzzle, her eyes gazing right at him.

“Ceriss, s-slow down, I’ll cum too soon!” he barked in desperation. He could not believe what her mouth felt like around him. She could mimic sensations almost as well as forms and voices, and he was not sure what could possibly feel like her mouth did over him, but it was unfair. She slipped free to slowly stroke his cock with her hand.

“You should not fight it, Leal. The more you resist the first one, the more you suffer when you find out I am not stopping. Pop the cork already, so we can have a little... heavier fun.” Ceriss grinned to her guard, who winced. She knew what she was doing. The first easy climax out of the way, he would last far longer when they resumed. He laid his head back, still looking down his body as that muzzle traced up and down, tightly suckling and feeling like perfection over his aching, jerking meat.

“Ah-huh! I’m gonna!” he barked in breathless warning to Ceriss.

“What a lovely tribute, Leal...” came a smooth and sultry voice. The guard’s eyes bolted open at Ceriss’ mimicked royal tone, and he cried out in a hot yip of disbelief as he saw Nita’s mouth overtake him again just as he gushed, her cheeks going concave as she suckled from the lupine geyser lying on the bed. He groaned helplessly and writhed as he sprayed an even more forceful second torrent as a reward for the broken taboo, and then squeaked out in desperate protest as the image of his queen was marred when Ceriss slipped

him from her muzzle and let him paint the next few hard stripes of his potent release over her muzzle before engulfing him again. Leal squirmed in the almost painful fit of a climax far more body-shaking than it would have been if Ceriss had not playfully taken the queen's form again and brought his fantasy to life.

"Damnit!" panted the guard, twitching in hot, aching spasms. He dropped his head back, wheezing from the force as Ceriss suckled the last few drops from him, slipping back to her dark form again. She then lifted her head and grinned at the embarrassed guard.

"You know you wanted it." She giggled to him sweetly.

"Ahuh... You cruel priestess! I haven't actually met Queen Razelle yet, now that's all I'm gonna see when she meets me for the first time, and she's gonna wonder what the hell's wrong with me!" he barked. Ceriss burst into a fit of laughter, and then got upon her knees and slipped back over the guard, straddling his chest.

"Quiet you." She panted. "You like this." Her skirt fell around his head, and it was nightfall for Leal. Her darkness was ahead of him, but the scent of her sex drove him to prove her right. His tongue parted her slick folds, and he was actually surprised to find out how hot that little exploitation of the guard's fantasies made her. She was literally dripping. His tongue dug into her eagerly for a while, and the priestess released a series of hot, shuddering, satisfied sighs. It was less like just pleasuring her and more like scratching an itch she could not reach. He smiled a bit at that. She had really worked herself up.

Then something occurred to the wolf guard.

"Wait... How do you know I like that?" he asked.

"Imagine me without clothes." Ceriss panted. Leal lapped at her as she spoke, intentionally trying to make it hard for her to speak. She was so youthfully tangy and sweet. She was every bit what he longed for upon his tongue, but he felt this was not a disguise of taste. She was a woman after all, and certainly felt and tasted the part as she shivered with sweet joy at every eager push and pull of that powerful oral muscle.

"Easy enough, since you are almost nude as it is." Leal panted out glad to get to recover at least a little from his climax. It really wiped him out.

"Now... If you were in a somewhat darker room... or one with just a little lamplight, and a lot of shadows... would you notice me if I were naked?" the priestess asked. Leal widened his eyes and slapped Ceriss on the rump.

"You watched?!" he barked loudly.

“With keen interest. Misty would not have minded, I assure you. It was fascinating. It’s nice to see her with such confidence these days.” Crooned the priestess. “There’s my answer, so keep stuffing that tongue, Leal. Just because I draw upon your pleasure does not mean I am not allowed to have pleasure of my own.” Leal growled ardently and pushed his hands into her rump, spreading her half-moons and using his thumbs to part her slick, puffy folds. His tongue then assaulted that darkness-obscured tangy heat with a furious lust as he tried to get the mischievous priestess back. With the seriousness of all that was going on, how could she afford to be so light hearted?

It then occurred to Leal finally. It’s how she drew essence. She needed to have this light-hearted play to gain the power she would need for the fight ahead. As a priestess, she was trained to do this regardless of the amount of fear or pressure that was on her. He marveled at her training and her strength, and then resolved himself to lend her his own. He parted his muzzle wide and pitched his tongue hard into her, slathering it around and around and tightly against the little nub of her more shallow but prominent need. She squeaked happily and murmured eagerly,

“Rare to find ones who like doing it, much less do it well. Good Leal...” Ceriss then slipped down over him in a 69 position, and took him back in her mouth, making him tense up a bit, but it was not really as shocking with oversensitivity as he might have been a moment before. He was soon throbbing with life again in her muzzle, and began sawing at her clit feverishly with his pistoning tongue-flesh as he envisioned the things he wanted to do to her, but relaxed himself to prevent the rise back to a quick release. Because of how hard he was focusing on not popping again, he was almost not prepared when he heard a hot little “Nnnneeeh!” from Ceriss, and then a sweet howl as her hips quivered, and nectar poured from her convulsing honeypot onto his chest, marking him with her scent. She pulled off his cock to have her happy little fit, before turning around on him rather abruptly. She faced him, panting, looking quite pleased as the guard licked his chops.

“Nothing so amazing as what you do, but I am trained to patrol and give reports, M’lady.” Leal said cheekily, wiping his muzzle a bit.

“Good enough to earn a shared reward...” the priestess panted hotly, before driving her hips down and taking him inside herself in one hot, hard stroke. Leal grunted and then gave a surrendering groan. He could not believe he was being taken by another beautiful lady in his new post, let alone a Letai priestess of legend. It was hard for him to even look at realistically. Would his new job have a lot of extracurricular activity? Was it just him, or were the other guards used in this way? It certainly was not this way for him in his old post.

Ceriss stayed where she was a moment, letting him just wildly twitch inside her before started to rock her hips, smearing herself in an obvious intent of pleasuring herself against the root of his shaft for a while. It was only lightly pleasurable for him, but a lot of his joy came from the fact that he was being ridden happily by a legend. She kept her hands on his chest, and his ears folded back as he panted happily, watching her. Her hair was so long and full, bouncing and flowing as if lifted by invisible water sometimes as she shifted her form over his. He wondered at how she tamed that hair when she took another form, but supposed the extra volume of it was just obscured in the form, or even used to assist with the features. He had no idea how it really worked, but it was magical to watch her nonetheless. Her dark form left a lot to the imagination, since she literally appeared as a shadow astride his hips. He blushed again hotly, inhaling deeply as a predictable image played through his head.

“Ceriss, I can’t get that image out of my mind, damn you...” he panted with a short laugh to show he wasn’t genuinely angry about it, just a little frustrated.

“You would do anything for your beautiful queen, wouldn’t you, Leal?” came the royal voice again. Leal cried out in hot anxiety as he found his beautiful green-pelted highness astride him, his thick cock buried almost painfully deep inside. Even her hair was exactly as the portraits showed her. Was Ceriss guessing the rest, or was this really what Nita looked like in the nude? A ribbon of his seed was painted down her left breast, fallout from his hot release earlier. His thick masculinity jerked hard inside her squeezing sex, feeling so tight around him, those pink lips pulling outward a little as she drew her hips up and then plunged back down.

“Change back, Ceriss, you are gonna warp me permanently!” he cried, pitching his hips a bit, as if struggling to get free of the queen’s depths... like he would ever dream of getting free if it really happened to him.

“What scandal, the Queen of Amani... corrupting her innocent young guards...” the illusion of Nita’s voice crooned delicately, and her breasts bounced a bit as Ceriss rode Leal. Leal whined loudly, and then he heard Ceriss’ normal, and very hearty laughter. The shadowy lady wolf bounced hard and fast, not able to hold that appearance much longer as she felt the pleasure of their heated rutting rising in her. Leal growled and took Ceriss’ shoulders, making her squeak as he rolled her onto her back, hips driving hard into her, his passion, frustration, and slight fear driving him wild.

“Teasing... someone who works so hard... to help!” he barked in panted breaths, hips slapping hers almost abusively.

“Oh there you are, Leal... That’s where your passion lives... Your confidence... Let’s get a better look...” the devious expression in those yellow eyes was blotted out when they closed, and Leal growled out in fury as he felt

her bite the point where his neck and shoulder met. He snarled in furious lust and began shaking the entire bed with the barrage of hips, every ounce of muscle power going into the pounding that Ceriss was getting. He was not angry so much as frustrated, and it seemed the priestess knew exactly what buttons to push to get him in a state of sexual frenzy that he didn't know himself to be capable of.

"Nnnff! Mph, nk... Guh.." he drooled a bit against Ceriss' dark shoulder as she lurched back to meet him stroke for stroke.

"Harder, Leal, don't hold back!" she grunted. "Spend all that sweet energy for me... be angry! Look how I tease! I deserve it!" laughed Ceriss. Leal heard the protest of the wooden frame of the bed as he ravaged the dark priestess who finally released him from her teeth. He lifted his head only to see the panting, pleased, squirming and naked vision of his queen once again.

"Damn it Ceriss, I'm not stopping!" Leal barked in frustration. He could not remember ever truly letting himself completely cave to his whims, but there lay the Queen, shaken, ravaged, being slammed and roughed so savagely by her guard, and he could not possibly stop. Even if Ceriss told him to, he could not. He was given the further teasing of the image of his beloved majesty wailing in climax, before Ceriss lost hold of that essence ability and shifted back, her fur flickering even beyond that, paleness glimpsed beneath it. All Leal could think about though was the positively *raped* vision of his queen beneath him, with the full knowledge that he would carry that memory around with him forever.

So he didn't stop, even as Ceriss squalled with climax, and then gripped his hips with her thighs to slow him. Her legs were not strong enough to prevent his motion, and she just got her hips pulled up and slammed down with each stroke. The priestess got control of herself again, as best she could, having to use quite a bit of effort it seemed, to take that green-furred vision again.

"I'll come, your majesty..." Leal said, and then grunted loudly. She actually made him say it! That dirty trickster!

"Yes, my guardian! Please!" came Nita's voice. He surrendered to the fantasy, and exploded inside those greedily clinging depths, unable to believe the tremendous level of depravity he had driven himself to with this encounter with a Letai priestess. He burst so hard he hurt from it, and roared with his release as Ceriss arched, flickered black again, and contracted hard around his squirting member.

Leal lowered his head and bit Ceriss, just as hard and savagely as she had bitten him. If she liked it rough, that is what she would get. He continued to slam into her until his balls ached from the absolute emptiness from his fantasy-driven climax. What loyal subject didn't dream such a dream in the most

depraved and darkest recesses of their loins? Ceriss had just poured the brightest light on his most forbidden lust, and ignited it like wildfire! He then lifted his head, panting heavily, feeling so deliciously spent and grateful, despite how depraved he felt.

Ceriss lay before him, panting, barely conscious, dazed, and solid white. Her fur was the most pristine snowy color he had ever seen, her long hair poured around the pillow, silky and gleaming, her perfect body limp on the soft bed, her eyes amber-gold, barely visible through heavy lids as she panted raspily. This extraordinary vision of lupine beauty, Leal understood immediately, was Ceriss' real appearance. He was looking at her true form, and he was in utter awe. He held himself inside her, still twitching, and then kissed her. She half-heartedly kissed back, seeming too dazed to give it real effort, and he rested against her, just feeling himself against her quivering, spent body.

"I think I broke you." Leal panted, gazing lovingly at her prone and tortured form. She smiled weakly and nodded a little.

"I'll recover. I misjudged how much energy... I spent to capture the queen's look. I overextended my focus a little." She panted. "Drawing essence makes it harder to focus on spending it... when drawing it feels so goood." She tilted a long and satisfied groan. "You are lucky. No one else in this era has seen my real fur, Leal. No blabbing about it, got it?" the priestess asked, looking at him sternly. He nodded, as she took her darkened form again, her fur flickering occasionally for a while until she recovered more fully. He kept his body over hers for some time.

"Was there enough energy, M'lady?" the slightly exhausted guard asked softly. Ceriss smiled up at him.

"There is more to you than you realize, Leal. Your essence is a lot stronger than a normal Mountain Grey." Ceriss stated cryptically.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Just what I said... You might not know it, but you have essence similar to a royal house member. I would not be surprised if you were related far, far back in your family tree." He felt her gentle hand stroke his backside, trailing claws over him worshipfully.

"So... this is good? I can help?" he asked. The lady wolf grinned at him lovingly, an expression of genuine affection that warmed Leal to his bones. She answered in a breathy, but serious tone.

"In time, you may be doing more than you ever imagined, Leal..."

Chapter 6

What kind of place was this? Alps looked around in abject confusion. It was a forest, but the trees were unbearably tall, the tops almost out of sight, giving the forest the appearance of being columns holding up a ceiling he could not see. There were bees everywhere, and if he got too close, they would sting Alps, which irritated him, but he had endured far worse pain in his life. There were plates with foods that he remembered not being fond of as a child, and occasionally he could hear a woman scream. After a few minutes wandering in this weird place, he found a painting of Luna posed in a cry of anguish. It was nailed to a tree. There were pictures of her crying, hurt, bleeding, or otherwise suffering on quite a few of the trees after he spotted the first one. He then gritted his teeth and fumed, flittering his little wings with aggravation.

The winged lupine crossed his arms. Something about all of this was eerily familiar. Was there some reason he was here? He remembered talking with Luna and Reika about Bone, and they decided that it was safe to bring him along, and Reika kissed him, then he spent the day practicing with a staff with Nidaja, wearing himself out thoroughly, with Lira offering advice on the use of a sword as well, before her and Nidaja decided to spar a bit, and he got to watch some very impressive fighting. Then there was dinner, salted fish, which agreed with the slowly descending quality of food he expected on a long ocean trip. Then he crawled in bed with Nita, and she had him go down on her while she played with his wings almost the whole time, before returning the favor, and he curled up with her in that small bed, and they went to sleep. Where the hell could he be? Wait a moment...

"What the hell? Did I Shadowfall myself or something?" he asked to no one in particular. He tried to change the place, as he had learned to do in a Shadowfall before. It did not change. "Uhhh..." It had all the classic looks of a Shadowfall. It was filled with things that were designed to make him suffer, though bees and vegetables and spicy fish were not things he counted as high on the list where his suffering would have been concerned. "I should be seeing Chana standing over Nita's bleeding corpse if I'm in a Shadowfall. This is kid's stuff."

Almost on cue, he saw himself as a child. He was darting from place to place, bees all over him. He didn't seem to care about the bees. Alps watched as the younger version of himself ripped a picture of his mother off one of the trees, and held it like a shield, picking up a knife from one of the plates of unpalatable food.

“Don’t worry, we will get out of this cave together! Follow me and we will all be okay, I have done this more times than I can count to. Like... twenty five or something! Attack!” the six year old Aris darted off, and Alps gave chase. What the hell was this?

“Ellis? Are you in here? This is a dream, isn’t it?” he asked. Child Aris was rather fast, and Alps had to push himself to keep up, before they arrived at a house made of carefully stacked and sorted pictures of Luna suffering. This was a very surreal and bizarre scenario, and Alps felt it had to be a dream, but of what? And why could he not just wake up?

“There we go. We are safe here. This is Marx and that’s Reese. We are the resistance here. You can stay the night, and we will get you out of here.” Alps realized that the young wolf was not even talking to him, and he indicated two others who did not exist either, on carefully made chairs.

“Wait... I know this place...” The former slave leaned against a picture wall, his heart sinking. “How do I know this place? Oh by the essence...” he cupped his muzzle, his wings pinning back fearfully. He had been right. For a Shadowfall, the place was kids stuff. It was exactly the sort of thing that he would have hated the most as a child. He would not have known much suffering at that age, but fearing his mother suffering, bees if he had been stung already, and the food he didn’t like, along with being lost in the woods... those were the things a child would see in a hell custom made for him. He had been in a place like this for so long but he didn’t seem to be suffering. This was not how the Shadowfall was designed to work. Even after 700 years the crystal was forcing Luna to loathe her failures, the death and destruction around her... Ceriss stood vigil over the dead and was the last one alive to mourn their passing in a temple of darkness. They all suffered, why was this child... why was *he* playing?

“No, we cannot go yet. We have to stay and help the others to escape. It is our mission, and will do this for as long as it takes, until we save all our friends, and all your friends, and all their friends too.” The child was stubborn-sounding but had the mentality of someone brought up by a healer. It was glorious to save people. Healing and bringing happiness were the paramount responsibility for the Letai. Was he programmed so well at that young age? Alps felt a little embarrassed. As a child... he went insane. He created imaginary friends, an imaginary sacred mission, and he played for perhaps seven hundred years. Instead of languishing and suffering, he imagined the place entirely different. The bees, surely stinging him, went completely ignored... The pictures of his mother suffering were ignored and had no effect, he could somehow tell his way around the forest well enough to build a home and venture out and save his imaginary friends every day, and he had realized long ago that he didn’t need to eat to sustain himself in this place. The Shadowfall was completely pointless against him.

Young Aris then hopped up and said loudly, “Reese! Tend to their wounds; I sense another spirit entering this horrible place! I shall go to the light, and free another one! I cannot leave anyone in this place.” Alps felt a severe cold chill. He had said it.

He knew the words. He remembered them now, from so far back he could hardly picture it, but it was there. He said those words, and he said them a thousand times. And when he grew up, he came back, and he rescued people from this place, just as he had practiced it. And the Shadowfall had no effect on him. He could ignore it. He trained himself to do it as a child. In designing this terrible place, Vhale had never intended to send a child. He was not aware of the flaw. Adults suffer, but children more quickly adapt. They are not content to languish in their suffering the way an adult will. They don't know guilt and self-loathing. He felt a sudden rush of realization, and ran out of the little picture hut. The greatest things he could think of that he had ever done, freeing the Letai from the Shadowfall, saving the Asuna and then freeing himself and Nidaja, freeing Mannus himself to be able to come up with a way to possibly change the fate of all the Asuna and the Amani... he figured it out here. He wanted to remember that practice that made him what he ultimately became.

He caught up with himself, smiling as he watched himself do battle with an imaginary foe, marveling in how resilient a child could be, and then saw the young version of himself falter a bit.

"The way out?" he asked. "Where?" He looked around. Alps had not heard a voice, but the small Aris seemed to. Then again, he was interacting with imaginary friends. That was likely all he was seeing.

"What the heck?" the adult Alps asked, seeing a red line slit open between two of the trees. It looked like glowing blood, and poured out onto the ground, smoking lightly, seeming very hot as well as eerie.

"But what about the others?" young Aris asked, seeming unconvinced.

"You will come back for them, and you will be bigger and stronger." The adult Alps said under his breath. "The voice... I remember... The voice said I would be bigger and stronger, but if I stayed, then I could never help all of them..." Alps held his head. "What's going on? Why couldn't I remember all this before?"

Suddenly, the world began to pull inward, toward the red gash. The little wolf boy screamed, stabbing his knife into a tree to try to hold on. The gash was consuming everything. There was a roar that was deafening, and Alps remembered it clearly. This was not a mere dream; it was a very real memory. The things he had seen and done recently had brought it back. He had perhaps suppressed them when he was younger because they would have been confusing and traumatic, or the owner of his orphanage would have thought he was making things up and told him to stop talking or thinking about it.

Alps remembered how he made Reese, a young girl of fair fur and a long ponytail, someone who worked as a healer. She would take care of those Alps brought back, and he remembered his best friend, Marx. Marx had been real, and probably died of old age or in later raids for all Alps knew after he had been Shadowfallen. Marx was

a somewhat pudgy brown-furred rough-housing layabout that his mother felt was a bad influence on Alps, but that he liked to visit anyway. Marx had better toys because his parents spoiled him, and there were always wooden swords and painted wool armor to play with. Luna disliked war because it made life as a healer very tragic and dire, but Alps liked to play war with Marx. Luna taught the boys to play rescue instead of war, and the rotund youth actually liked it better, so that's what they did.

The realization of all this hit Alps just as the world bent inward toward the gash and then, Aris was gone and the rest of the world was too. The picture house, the bees, the screaming Luna everywhere, the plates of icky food, everything ceased to be. Alps stood alone in the dark.

"It collapsed. M... My Shadowfall collapsed. I fell into the Nether..." he said with a sense of dismal finality. "I... I don't want to remember this. Please, let me out... I don't want to remember!" he shouted, fearful of what he would see. What was in his Shadowfall he could handle, since it was only scary to a child, but he would be learning *real* fear in the Nether.

Alps jerked hard as he felt himself shaken. He was falling. He was in the Nether and he was falling! But he opened his eyes and saw Luna staring back at him, Nita looking fearful beside her. His mother looked very concerned, and his lover frightened.

"Wh... Wha..." He sat up, and found that his heart was racing, and he was panting.

"Are you alright, Aris?" Luna asked.

"I think so. Just a bad dream, sorry to alarm you love..." he looked apologetically at the Queen.

"You wouldn't wake up!" Nita said in exasperation.

"I'm sorry. I think... I think my brain needed to resolve that. I remember..." Luna shook her head.

"You don't have to talk about it." The white priestess stroked her son's head soothingly.

"I remember my Shadowfall." Alps sat forward, and fluttered his wings a little, looking over his shoulder at them and then smiling at Nita. As if under a spell, she softened. He pondered that a moment. It seemed almost as if he forcefully calmed her nerves. Luna seemed to notice it as well and quirked a smile at her son.

"Well, you don't have to speak of it if you don't want. It seemed like it was traumatizing to you." She stated. The white male lupine shook his head slowly. He was

getting over the shock and fear, and he had not seen anything really traumatizing in the dream.

“The Shadowfall I had as a kid was just stuff a little kid would not like. Bees and being lost in the woods and stuff I hated eating.” Alps stated. He calmly left out the millions of pictures of Luna suffering. She would not like to hear that he was surrounded by that for who knows how long. “I... I guess I just wrapped myself in fantasy as a kid though, and was ignoring those things. I pretended I was saving people and ran around with imaginary friends and had fun. I remember it rather vividly now... especially so fresh after the dream...” Alps felt the recollection growing a little cloudier as he spoke.

“Alps... That’s very...” Nita looked a little perplexed.

“That’s very fascinating...” Luna said, with a very serious tone in her voice. “A Shadowfall Crystal powers that false world off the suffering of those who are trapped. You will always be trapped, but the power it has to create illusions and pain are controlled by your own power. So you basically just hid away in your daydreams until something happened and you figured out how to get out? Oh!” Luna leaned forward suddenly, very attentive and interested. “Did you see how you learned how to get out? I want to hear this!” she cried.

“Uh...” Alps fidgeted. “That’s the part I didn’t want to see. I didn’t get out.” He swallowed, knowing full well what he witnessed.

“But you are out. And you learned to get out, because you did it with me.” His mother seemed a little distressed.

“Yeah, but I didn’t learn it then.” Alps stated. Luna suddenly looked very uncomfortable, looking away as if she might try to scope out an emergency exit from the conversation.

“What? What happened? Why did you not want to see? Why were you scared?” she asked.

“He got out of the Shadowfall, but he didn’t come right back here.” Luna whispered, suddenly pulling Alps to her. “Aris... As interesting as I think it would be to know how you gained the ability that you have, it’s probably not... worth it to you to remember that place.”

“What place?” the Queen asked insistently.

“The same place the one who replaced Mannus came from.” Alps finally answered. Nita wilted.

“Coming back from the Shadowfall is one thing... that place preserves you. But the description of the place where Nether energy comes from... There is no way a child could survive long in there.” Luna leaned back again. “Don’t try too hard to remember, Alps. We know, and that’s fine. We can move on with that. You went through a lot, so we can just focus on the reward for getting out, right?” She kissed her son on the nose, making him blush a bit. Nita kissed him on the lips, still seeming as if she didn’t understand, but obviously grateful that he did get out.

“What time is it?” Alps asked.

“It’s morning, late enough. You had overslept, so we came to check on you.” Nita answered.

“I’m hungry.” The young male said.

“Then get some food, love.” Nita stretched a little and stood up. “I shall return to my studies. Come meet me when you are done. I want to spend a bit of time with you. Despite being stuck on a ship, we have hardly seen one another. It’s so busy.” Luna nodded to her son again as well and looked to Nita.

“As we were then?” she asked. The green-furred Amanian smiled and left. Alps headed for the galley, having not been terribly hungry, but wanting to just have his thoughts for a bit. There was a lot in that single dream for him to have to absorb, and while he was not overly hungry, he would eat, and consider those things. Ultimately he knew that he would have to remember what he saw in that place.

He found unfortunately that the galley was occupied, but he decided to stay because of who was there. Lira was sipping what appeared to be tea, and writing in a journal. Alps sat across from her, and she looked up, peering at him for a while.

“Stay like that a moment.” She stated. Alps held still, not certain why.

“Can I speak?” he asked.

“Yes. Just no moving around much.” She seemed to be sketching in her journal. This embarrassed Alps a little, but he allowed it.

“Have you figured out the way that we will be travelling? Your charts looked like they would creep a little north, to the far northern edge of the Asuna territory, near the mountains. That doesn’t leave us many directions to run.” Alps wanted to be helpful.

“It gives us only two directions other than the direction we are travelling to really need to watch, also. That’s more important for a smaller group. Our best bet to escape harm is a head start or not to be seen at all. Standing and fighting and then hoping to have an avenue of retreat are not going to be an option.” She sounded a lot like Nidaja. It made sense that they worked on the plans together.

"That course takes us close to Luca before we leave Amanian territory." Alps stated inquisitively.

"Yes. Is there something that you need there? We will be close enough to resupply in that place, but if we do, only one or two of us can risk venturing into town. A group travelling will generate news and rumors."

"I grew up there." Alps stated. "I can resupply there and no one would likely think twice about it. I am gonna check up on someone there too." He said. He had heard Misty give orders to replace Chana as a matriarch, but her wording of it concerned him and the council skirted around the issue with him. He did not want to be a pest about it, but he could learn this way.

"I will allow that, but we will be very brief there. It's not truly necessary to stop given who you travel with. We have much of what we need on the road. Remember that." She went back to her sketching. She seemed too young to be so serious.

"Do you like travelling like this?" Alps asked, wanting to get to know her better at least. He might have to depend on her for his life.

"I have always liked it, yes. I have seen many strange and wonderful things. My friends where I grew up used to tease me. They said I intended to see everything, and I would cross them all off my list until finally I could cross off Mannus himself." She got a good chuckle out of that. Alps swallowed uncomfortably.

"I imagine it is possible you will see him with the adventure you have signed up for." He offered this meekly, trying to hold his position.

"If I see him, I will make every attempt I can to make him pay for my family. My friends are right in saying he's probably the last person I would ever see." She held up the book, showing Alps a very good likeness of him, an image from the chest up, wings and all. Alps applauded that, wanting to escape the line of discussion.

"You like art then? What would you like to do eventually? What if we are successful? What if it ends a lot of the threat, and he's pushed back into the mountains and can be held at bay? What would you do with your life?" he asked.

"Find the truth!" Lira stood proud. "There's a lot of things that time has forgotten, and I can explore places that I could never reach before, and learn the origins of the Letai, and of the powers that started all of this. There is so much to know, and so much of it is hidden from us by artificial borders and threat of death. My family has always sought the true history of the Letai. You have no idea how incredible it is to me to actually travel with people who lived 700 years ago. I understand you don't remember anything, but I have worn Luna out with my questions, I am sure. And the Letai are such a beautiful people. The books tell you, but to look at you..." Alps squirmed a bit,

able to move now, and wanting to after that level of compliment. "How about you? What would you do if there was no more fear of a sudden and overwhelming end?" Alps pondered that a moment. He had actually been giving it more thought of late.

"I would want to have a family with Nita, of course..." he stated this matter-of-factly, but left a slight upward inflection to indicate there would be more.

"Of course..." Lira offered in the expectant tone. She encouraged him to share more, but the more was something Alps was not certain he could pursue if Nita was more concerned with having a happy family and running her empire without additional worry. Alps looked away.

"The others..." he whispered. He was thinking about it more after the dream. He had practiced it as a child for centuries, perhaps. Was it so ingrained in him that he just did it naturally, like an instinct?

"The others?" she asked.

"I would want to go into the Shadowfall and find the others who were sent in there." Alps stated. He felt so selfish in saying that. He made it out alive, and he even brought a few others out, but there was no guarantee he would always be safe doing that, and Nita had already expressed reservations about him being in the Shadowfall intentionally. She was outright cross with him for being so reckless with Nidaja.

"I think Nita would support that decision, Alps... If you told her you felt it was important." Lira stated.

"No, I don't think so. She would not want to risk losing me. She said so herself." He leaned back a bit, looking at the picture of him with the wings again. He had not looked at them in a mirror, so it was very interesting to see what other people were seeing when they looked at him.

"Alps, I think she says that because she does not want you thinking others expect you to do it. She doesn't want you to be forced into that risk." Lira leaned forward a bit.

"I am sure she doesn't want me thinking that, but at the same time, she has everything to lose, and little to gain from my going back." Alps stated. Lira looked at him blankly a moment.

"Nothing to gain...?" She leaned back, seeming a bit dumbfounded. "Alps... Did you forget? Her mother is in there." The white wolf froze. He had heard it before, but felt almost sick in the realization that he had never given it a second thought. Nita rarely, if ever spoke of her mother. Her absence was the reason she was so unhappy and cold when they first met. Alps put his fingertips to his temples, his wings shrinking back. Nita had an incredibly great reason to want Alps to hunt for lost people in the

Nether, but neither she nor Nidaja, who was in there with him, asked. They would not risk him, even for that. Alps looked up to Lira.

“With how fast things had been going, I have not really considered that. I must admit, I hadn’t thought about it at all.” Alps felt almost ill with regret. He could have looked. He could have stayed a little longer; it would not have made much of a difference in his getting back. But, he could worry about that later. He knew that the more pressing issue to Nita would be to have a worth-while place to bring her mother back to. Alps would bring her back without a second thought if he could figure out how to find a specific person.

“I would not worry yourself about it. Nita would likely be angry if you tried without her consent. Focus on what we must do for now. Then you can worry about perhaps finding a safer way.” Lira looked back to her sketch book, added some writing, but Alps could not read it. She was writing in the same form that he saw in the Asuna library.

“You are friendly with the Asuna already, aren’t you?” he asked.

“This is true, and I suppose it doesn’t make you think ill of me as I might have suspected when we first met. You are traveling with a pair of them, and Nidaja seems to really like the hyena boy she’s traveling. Not to say I would mind it myself.” She chuckled. “How about you? Do you feel good about our future alongside the Asuna?”

“Without a doubt.” Alps stated, but did not go into more detail about why. “I think it will be hard work on both sides though, and the Asuna are hurting very bad right now. We will want to do all that we can to help them and show that we mean to be allies, not just tolerant.” He mulled over his own words for a while, and then continued. “There will soon be plenty of land to share among us, and much of it has grown wild and forbidding, I am sure. We will do better settling it together.” The white lupine stood up, stretching a bit. He felt much better after this discussion, thinking more about the positive-sounding distant future.

“Alps...” Lira said in a gentle tone.

“Yes?” he replied with a smile.

“Your friends believe in you. You should believe in yourself too. It’s the best chance we will have, and they all know it.” He blushed brightly at her words, but was fearful, so fearful that they were absolutely true.

The grey-furred lupine guard sat with his elbow resting on a small but polished wooden table that was set up facing the main door to the queen’s vacation home. He was adorned in his normal guard-duty attire, his silver mail hauberk, dark leather

trousers, and his sword. The sword Leal carried was long and slightly curved, and along his back he carried, upside down and easily reached, a slender, but long knife that was good for close quarters combat. The sword and knife seemed to be all one piece construction, very strong and almost utilitarian, but still regal in the sweeping hilt and heavy, balancing pommel on each. Leal glanced up to the large, heavy wooden doors as one of them swung open almost silently on gleaming well-oiled brass hinges. His hand immediately sought out the pommel of his sword, resting on it at the ready in case someone unbidden entered.

His captain Lunariss entered. He carried in a great deal of water cast down in rivulets and pooling onto the floor from his dark leather cloak. It was still heavily raining outside. To see the dark-furred lupine enter was reassuring to Leal, as he worried that he would face what was coming with just himself and Ceriss. The priestess seemed confident she could handle the assassins, but the guard, given his training, felt such confidence was foolish. Still, he would not dare tell her such. She was at least powerful enough to handle him, he was sure. He considered his good fortune in having Lunariss back only a moment before he saw someone follow him in, also in cloak, though hers was fabric. The very small individual simply took it off, wearing nearly beggar's clothes beneath, a size too small, even for one her size her tunic hugged the tan-furred lady's very modest bosom with the threat that it might pop the two buttons that it held itself together with. Her pants looked as if they could not make up their mind whether they wanted to be shorts and were threadbare above the ankles. Her feet were adorned in wooden sandals with hemp straps holding them on.

"A... guest?" asked Leal. Did his captain just want to get a poor girl out of the rain? She was certainly not going to be better off in this place.

"Someone to assist us with watch." Lunariss replied, taking off his cloak to let the guard see his captain's war attire. Plate armor was rare as it was expensive to make, hot to have on, and required a lot of strength and confidence in one's ability even against high odds to wear, but steel plate armor was what the black-furred captain had on, polished and painted black with silver trim like Nidaja's leather armor. He looked regal and extremely dangerous, only made to look larger by the angled pauldrons with large slink-teeth and heavy cuirass. He wore a steel plated sash in front that looked like a slightly tapering loincloth, and was gilded with an angular tribal-looking pattern. It seemed almost barbaric, something an Asuna might wear. Leal grimly wondered if the outfit had been won from a hyena in a fight. The loose-looking heavy canvas-style trousers vanished into black gilded leather boots that matched the outfit. Lunariss' single-edged sword was a little longer than his own, but more slender and with a curve to it, making it better for hewing than for crushing. He was, like Leal, dressed and ready for battle. The presence of a strong, seasoned veteran should have comforted the guard but it only verified his suspicions that this would be a real fight. Even his former captain had told him it was terrifying every time. Neit looked between the pair and folded her ears back.

“Oh hey... No armor on this girl, so I’ll just see my way out. I suddenly think I might be a little squishy for what’s to come.” She turned on her heel. Leal narrowed his eyes.

“Wait, I know you...” He crossed his arms. “You sure you want this one in the queen’s summer home, captain?” He padded over to Neit as she was captured by the base of her tail by Lunariss with a soft squeak.

“She will do nicely. She has a debt to repay.” The larger male turned her tail loose and she rubbed the base of it, looking with irritation at him, and then to Leal.

“I don’t doubt that. She’s a thief.” Leal stated.

“Was a thief.” Neit corrected, sighing. The grey guard continued.

“I am sure I still have her narrow little face with her greedy beady eyes on a poster in my bounty box at the castle.” What was Lunariss thinking? How could he bring someone like this in a place that was sure to contain Royal valuables?

“She’s been encouraged to turn over a new leaf... works for us now.” Lunariss slapped Neit on the back, making her nearly topple forward.

“A royal pardon? Are you kidding? She had two thousand on her last I checked.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest defiantly to the idea of going into battle with such a person. “...And the poster did not go so far as to recommend what condition she was brought in under... or how much of her was required intact to get the reward.” He glowered at Neit. She fumed back, seeming not to enjoy being reminded of her past. She broke in before the captain could speak again.

“Cool it, guard-boy. You had your chance, you didn’t catch me, I got pardoned, now you have to watch me traipse around in this beautiful home and get my thief hair all over the carpet and eat her fine foods and drink the wine, and I will laugh at you the whole time because you could never catch me if you lived a hundred –“ There was a loud thump and Leal had to dodge her as she was flung past him. He didn’t even see Lunariss hit her, but it silenced her, the dazed girl looking up at Leal from the floor. The grey wolf blushed slightly as he looked down at her where she had landed behind him. Both the buttons of her tattered and sad outfit had popped off, letting the tunic fall open and present smallish but attractive breasts to both guardians. She sat up, closing her arms over her chest, looking in horror at Lunariss.

“Ahh, the peace and quiet.” Lunariss rumbled. Leal made it a point not to intentionally antagonize the girl back. He knew that his captain would have given him the very same if he were so out of line, even if Neit was a thief.

“What the hell?!” the former thief cried out, trying to salvage her outfit somehow. “Is this how you ask for a favor?” Leal could understand why. Striking a female in

Amanian culture was one of the worst taboos a male could cross. He was surprised even his captain could so boldly do it. Lunar is crossed his arms and glared at Neit, though he broke to a smile.

“Did I say it was a request, girl?” Leal watched his captain studiously as he spoke. It was a bit disarming how confident and forceful he could be. His position made it so he had to be. Neit looked with despair at the high-ranked official.

“You made it seem like you needed my help for a threat upon the royal family. The Queen has forgiven my trespasses. Bring her here, I will speak with her and have your stance with me corrected.” The girl stood up.

“The queen...” Lunar is turned slowly, “Is in danger. She is doing something of great importance, and her would-be murderers are trying to prevent her from succeeding. You will help us watch for them, and you will help us fight them. You gave yourself to the royal family. Surely you knew what that meant. Your life is pledged to their service, Neit.”

“They have you! They are not in any less danger with me here. You cannot use my life as you see fit when the family doesn’t even need it.” The girl put her hand down, fists tightly balled, and then gasped, covering her chest again. Leal looked away, shaking his head. What did Lunar is think she could do? This girl would sooner stab him in the back than help him fight.

“There is a danger, if any of the assassins escape, Neit.” He answered her bluntly. “Your job is to make sure to watch their movements, and make sure that none have fled the property. You will fight only if ordered, so I would not worry much.”

“If she doesn’t want to, making her stay won’t be of much use.” Leal said sagely. Neit softened her attitude toward the grey-furred guard immediately. She nodded and pointed him out.

“No one is better for the task. She has better eyes and ears than most, and can follow her mark almost as silently as Nidaja if they slip away and lead us to that individual, and any other survivors.” The captain stood by the doorway leading into the study, where Ceriss would be.

“Is the whole army hiding out here? You seem sure it’s gonna just be a slaughter in your favor.” Neit looked toward the study, just as Ceriss, disguised as the queen appeared. She glared at Neit, who shrank back a little. “Surely you do not need me too? You have powerful knights, great magic, and your sister is a great tactician. I will mess this up and bring shame upon the royal family the whole time I’m here.” said the young former thief. Leal looked to the ‘queen’. He had not met the real Nita Razelle, but the thief seemed to have done just that, and she still fell for the disguise.

"I could release you from your obligations if you like, young Neit... and you shall retain your freedom for a time. But by now, I am sure you have noticed that while your crimes have been forgiven, your face has not been forgotten. Have you had trouble finding honest work, Neit? You look a little tattered." Her voice sounded accusatory and very regal, but he could not bring himself to look into those violet eyes. Not after what he'd done with the faux queen. He looked down in what must have appeared to be subservience to 'Nita'.

"Your highness, I have found life to be very challenging, yes. What money was given to me before to start anew I have given up to cut the ties I once had to folks who were loathe to lose my services... But I would never succumb to the temptations of my former life. I will never have as good a second chance as you have given me. I will find something for me." She looked down as well. "I will not jeopardize my freedom."

"Your freedom is assured then, but will you thrive, Neit?" Ceriss asked in what was obviously a convincing Nita voice.

"It will be hard." the girl stated in a soft tone, looking away.

"Harder than the task we offer to you?" Lunariss asked, cutting in.

"I don't know." The girl seemed a lot more serious, and a little sad. Leal found himself suddenly wondering at the things that drove her to become a thief in the first place. He always assumed thieves did what they did because they were ultimately lazy, and it was the fastest and easiest way to get the objects you desired. Neit seemed lazy in her refusal to help.

"Had you expected we would make you do this thing for free?" Ceriss asked.

"No offer of payment was given." Her answer was quick, but she seemed to perk up. "This is a dangerous task. What is the help of just an extra pair of eyes and legs worth? I'm no fighter."

"I offer you ten percent of your last bounty if you stay the night. If you contract yourself to work for me henceforth, your full bounty shall be lavished upon you. Does this suffice? Will it give you a better start at your new life, Neit?" Leal folded his ears back. Two thousand. That was not a small amount. Did Ceriss really have it, or was she bluffing and simply did not expect the thief would survive. Neit's eyes were huge upon the offer though. She staggered back a little, and let her tunic fall open again. This time, for a bit, she did not correct herself. She was too stunned.

"I... I won't get a better opportunity than this..." She said it more to herself than to anyone else. Leal blinked at that. The queen would have the services of this thief, but what was it worth? What use would the royal family have for her? Still, he was not about to object to Ceriss' words. Lunariss nodded at her and seemed to go along with it, however bad an idea it was.

"You likely will not, but you know it can be dangerous. Then again, you spent half your life among murderers and in the shadow of the gallows. At least you will have someone thank you for your successes this time." Ceriss' tone was as regal and elegant as he imagined Nita to be. She was very convincing. It only made him blush more. Would Lunariss ever find out about it?

"I have to accept. I have no better choice I can make." The girl seemed very resolute in that. 'Nita' nodded her head and returned to her study, closing the door. Leal knew the real reason was that it took a lot of energy to hold the disguise. It made no sense to him why so much was invested on getting the girl's help, however. She gasped and covered her chest again, flustered. "Well... I suppose I am in, then. Try not to get me killed, please."

"Leal." Lunariss' voice was deep and commanding. He stood at attention instinctively.

"Yessir." He barked.

"Take Neit to the east wing. General Nidaja and her sister used to stay there when they were younger. The clothing there might fit our newly commissioned guard better. At the very least, it might survive the night." Leal saluted and nodded to Neit.

"I can't wear the queen's clothes without permission." The thief seemed taken aback at the casual suggestion.

"She cannot wear them anymore. She's grown up." Lunariss said. This seemed to insult the petite Neit, but she followed Leal anyway. The walk there was frosty enough given the insult, but looking around the room, she seemed to perk up. It was very elegant and refined. It showed wealth, but had things a young girl might like to have around. There was a music box, a canvas for painting, a desk with a few books upon it, and a very elegant looking bed. Tapestries and curtains hung on the wall to give the room bright and cheery colors. Leal pointed her to a wardrobe with a large mirror on it. The smallish lupine female began sorting through a few outfits. Nita was still so young when the yoke of royalty was dropped upon her, so this room had frozen in time at that point. The clothing, to Neit's surprise and delight, fit perfectly. She selected a white leather tunic that elegantly drew in double over her chest, to almost her side where it fastened with an elegant silver frog button. She wore underneath this leather a dark blue blouse with billowy sleeves made of something light like silk, but she wasn't sure if that was what it was. As the cottage was often the queen's summer home, and before she was expected to be more refined, there were shorts more than there were pants or skirts, but the shorts seemed the better choice for a lookout that might need speed. She selected a pair matching the tunic that were cuffed heavily so as to have wide cuff-bands on the legs, making them appear almost overly short, but they looked rather sexy and adventurous. It was enough to get Leal to heat up again in picturing the queen wearing them. The young lady wolf then turned and gestured to the

door. Leal looked at her blankly for a bit, and then nodded, leaving the room to let her get dressed. She did so quickly, and came out, looking much better, and somehow more thief-like even with the nice clothing.

“That’s much better.” Leal stated, nodding to her.

“It’s the nicest thing I have ever worn.” She positively beamed, “I’ve never even stolen clothing this nice.” She remarked of this with a bit of fondness. She seemed much happier now that she was wearing something respectable.

“It is very fitting. It looks good on you.” Leal said honestly. He indicated she should go to the main hall again to be given her assignment from her new boss.

“I am a royal guard now, huh...” the girl asked softly, seeming unable to believe it.

“If that is what the royal family wants you to be, yes.” Leal answered. He was comforted a little in how profound this seemed to be to her. A thief, made a member of the royal guard. She seemed to understand both the irony, and the opportunity this presented her.

“I wonder if Alps will be proud of me...” Leal tilted his head a bit, puzzled. She knew Alps too? He had heard the name dropped all over the castle already, and had been told a little about him, but the impression he made on others was almost uncanny.

“You know him?” the elder guard asked.

“I do. Not as well as I would like, but he’s very kind and generous, and he fights hard for his friends. He was taken by the Asuna, and then came back, I heard, but I don’t know where he is now. Probably with Misha and Uri on some adventure. I can’t see how Nita lets him go. She loves him so much.” There was the barest hint of jealousy in her voice.

“He seems to make friends easily. I will eventually meet the guy, I’m sure. I heard he has white fur. He’s solid white? All over?” Leal asked. He’d not seen anything like that until he met Ceriss.

“All over.” The girl made her statement with an emphasis on the ‘all’, and seemed suddenly very pleased by it. The grey-furred guard flicked his ears a bit. Had she been very close with him, then? Did Nita know?

“I think white fur is lovely.” Leal stated, finding himself suddenly embarrassed. He had felt a deep connection with Misty, but found himself also enamored with Ceriss. This was not a part of his life he expected to become confusing when he became a royal guard. He felt he was pretty well done with a social life. Things were far different.

“Alright, layabouts. I think it’s show time.” Lunar’s voice was loud, carrying down the hall. Leal stood straight, stiffening. Show time? The assassins? Already? He turned and ran toward the main hall where his captain was. Neit ran behind, whimpering a little. She was certainly not used to running into battle. Lunar stood in the main room when the others arrived. He held a kitchen knife out for Neit. “Defense only unless told otherwise. I will go to the balcony overlooking the garden with Miss Neit here... she will be observing the fight from there, and staying low. If anyone slips away, she will follow, but hopefully she will still be watching from the balcony when the fight is over.” Panting, Neit nodded. If she didn’t have to do anything but watch, it would still be horrifying for her. She agreed, though. She would stick with it until the end. Lunar continued. “Nita is already waiting there. She will draw them out, and when we have the signal, we push the attack and make sure no one leaves.” Neit took the knife and panted out in exasperation and fear before blurting out,

“Wait, Nita’s there? We are letting her risk herself to draw them out?” She seemed mortified.

“She knows what she’s doing, trust us.” Lunar said.

“This is crazy! Is there more than one or two?”

“Possibly a lot more. It’s what remains of the Spirits of Silverlight. They’ve turned on their leader, and decided to pursue a new future for themselves and for the Amani.” Lunar finally told Neit what was going on.

“Lunar, there’s hundreds of those guys, they even control trade east of Seravi.” Neit panted out. “If they attack the queen directly, they won’t risk failure with one or two assassins. This is going to be over the top. They can’t risk putting her on her guard or being able to order war against them.”

“My, my. A little tactician too. You might be more useful than you think. Come, to the balcony. Leal. Do as I asked.” Lunar nodded to the guard, who turned and headed for the garden. This was it. This was the fight that he had trained all his life to be in. A fight for the life and honor of his queen, the greatest moment of valor a guard could face. It didn’t matter that it was not the real queen; the intention to kill the queen was in the hearts of those who would attack. His chest felt heavy, his feet heavier. Sounds echoed in his ears as things seem to move almost in slow motion at that moment of realization. Would he be up to this task?

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 7

The sun had just risen, and the gentle rocking motion of the boat woke Alps slowly. He rubbed his eyes, and found his bed to be barren of Nita, who he expected would be there. It was still so early, but he pulled on his trousers, having slept spooned lovingly up to his life-mate-to-be, and padded up to the deck to see where everyone could be scarcely beyond the dawn. He didn't bother with his shirt, as he did not know if he would be heading back to bed when he found that breakfast was not ready. The grayish morning light showed mist coiling and spilling about on the ocean water, but rising on the port side of the ship was land. They had made it, and had weighed anchor on what seemed to be a completely unpopulated stretch of shoreline. The shore itself looked rocky and inaccessible, and the ocean was a little choppy up close to it.

"Here then?" Alps asked, spotting Nidaja and Nita standing with Lira. The three of them seemed fully dressed and quite awake. Nita wore her royal robes with rather nice gilding, Nidaja her usual cape and leather armor. The newly appointed guide wore a rather bright outfit, red and violet with gold trim. It did not seem like the thing a survivalist would wear, but it looked nice on her with her green fur. Her cape, a little less ornate than Nidaja's, was deep red, sweeping the ground behind her a little. She nodded.

"It's about ten miles further north than I had originally intended, based on the curve of the land, but it'll suit us as a starting point. Still far from any towns or villages. Misha and Uri navigate very precisely without a familiar port to steer toward, or a light to guide them." Uri slipped her hand over Alps' back, startling him a bit as he turned and found her there with Misha.

"Glad to hear it, Lira. You did not choose the safest location to drop off. The rowboat... will maybe have some issues with those rocks." Uri wore the silky outfit that Alps had seen her wear the first day they met, a deep violet crossed in an 'X' over her chest to her hips to barely cover her breasts, then coming back around her hips as a belt which held up short white canvas shorts. Her belt held that heavy-looking short axe, just as she had that first day. It was rather nostalgic. Misha wore a simple button-up blue shirt and long dark brown trousers, seeming more like she was there to work than to look good on the ship, but her short fur, tall and strong body and angular features left her sexy nonetheless. Alps looked back to the rocks. The water did seem dangerous around them.

“They will be fine.” Lira stated softly, crossing her arms. “We can navigate them easily enough when we get closer. Those rocks are further apart than they look from here. We will do alright.” She nodded to Alps, as if he was expected to know that. Nidaja spoke up with a smile.

“Well, we will set out on land in a couple of hours. I am going to assist Luna and Vhale in getting the supplies together. Vhale has gracefully agreed to carry a little extra of the perishables, since those won’t last forever. We will eat a little better for a time for that.”

“What shall I do?” Alps asked, looking back and forth. Putting supplies together and carrying them used to be what he did. He was not used to being any higher in rank than the very bottom, so it was a little unusual to think of Vhale pulling the load. However, it was Alps who determined that Vhale would be a slave in service of the Amani Queen.

“Are you okay with tiring yourself out before you even get on land, Alps?” Nita asked, giving a smile that was a little disarming. Alps backed up slightly at that, and then smiled.

“Oh! Of course. Just because you released me of my obligations doesn’t mean I wanted to stop serving you, my love.” His words were very clear with intent and meaning. He wanted to make sure that Nita knew that the wolf would always want to lighten her burdens, and those of his friends any way that he could. It was not about his duty, it was about his love. Nita gave a very playful grin, and then nodded to Misha and Uri.

“He’s all yours. Just make sure he can walk when you are done.” Alps nearly flinched at her words. It was not so much that she said it, he knew that she intended to still share him with her closest friends because of the happiness and pleasure that she knew he could give them, it was that she was willing to candidly do something like that right in front of Lira, who they hardly knew. He looked back to Uri, who took him by one of his wrists. She noticed the look of surprise on his face, it seemed, as she murmured sultrily,

“You didn’t think you were gonna make this trip and not get a chance to spend a little time with your friends. It might be a while before we see you again, so we are not gonna squander this opportunity.” Alps furtively glanced to Misha, who was already following as he was being lead to below-deck. He flittered his wings cheerfully and looked back to Nita.

“I won’t take too long.” He promised, knowing that everyone was about ready to get under way, but he could not disagree with the intentions behind what Uri and Misha wanted. While they did not come out and say it, this might very well be the last time they got to see Alps at all. It was true, even if sad, and they would not want to think

they did not get to say goodbye in their intimate fashion. Still, Alps refused to let himself think about it like that. They wanted to have fun, he would make sure that they did.

Alps was lead back to his own cabin where he and Nita had been sleeping perhaps hours before. The bed was unmade as he had not expected to be coming back so soon. He smiled at Uri and Misha, knowing very well what they had planned for him. He rumbled softly,

“I have missed you both. I guess Nita could tell.” He was nearly at a whisper. Alps felt kind of guilty that she felt like she might have to share his affections with others, but she was a good friend to these girls, and cared deeply about their happiness, just as he did his. If they were not interested, or if he were not, he was sure she would not have made this a point. He glanced around the room. It seemed darker than he remembered it, but it was perhaps because he just came back from above deck, or because of the intimate encounter he was sure was about to transpire.

“We know. And we miss you as well. When all of this is over... calmed down... you will see us more. There will be less cause for all of the back and forth.” Misha’s tone was soothing and smooth, her usual calm demeanor always a treat for Alps. Uri was less calm, pulling her shorts off and rather severely grabbing Alps’ shoulders and casting him down onto the bed.

“Oh! Heh! You missed me too I see!” he huffed as he put his hands over his head as he lay back on the bed. He wondered if the tone was to stay the same. Was Uri about to ravage him? He would not mind, but that would be exhausting.

“Remember, love...” Misha said of her sweet black-furred partner, “... He is to be able to travel when we are done. I know that look in your eyes. Lyat will not thank you for having to carry Alps the first day or so of their journey.” Uri put her hands on her hips, bare with her shorts missing. She did not hide what she wanted. She looked back and flattened her ears.

“They didn’t give us long.”

“It was plenty of time.” Misha encouraged. She slipped out of her boots and trousers, smiling at her lover and then unbuttoning her shirt, her slender, quick tail wagging. “Maybe we should ask Alps what he wants. I bet he doesn’t just cuddle and talk this time.” She shot him a playful glance. Alps was already undoing his belt. Oh no... It would not be a gentle late night conversation this time. Uri paused a moment, then spoke up.

“Alright, Alps. You get to decide. How would you like your dear friends after so long an absence?” The white lupine sat up a bit, and gazed back and forth between the two of them. He considered that a moment. It had been a while since he was with either of them. In that time, he had traveled a long way, and had sampled things from Nidaja’s point of view, and then tried a few of those things in his own form, and found

them not only likable to him, but also to those he shared himself with. If Nidaja enjoyed those things so much, surely the fiery Uri might as well. He grinned broadly.

“Oh, he’s got something there, don’t you Alps?” Uri said, uncrossing her top and pulling it off of herself. The garment was a simple, long, flowing band of silky material that coiled in a very specific way to form the top that she wore. It was elegant in how simple it was, needing not even a clasp to stay on and deliciously tight on her body. Alps looked at the long ribbon that said top became, and then glanced about the room. The bed had two metal rails on the wall above it used to secure it up in high seas to keep it from being cast across the room and into someone unfortunate enough to be present. Alps looked back to Misha and chuckled.

“I remember upon our meeting you were not so keen on knowing the feel of a male sating himself with you, Misha.” Alps watched her wilt a little. He knew she made the exception for him, but she still definitely preferred Uri.

“It’s true, I didn’t, but I have grown to like it.” She stated this in her still soothing tone. “...With you at least.”

“Even so...” Alps said, moving over and slipping his hand over Uri’s chest. She cupped her hand over his, as he gave an appraising squeeze of her round mammary. Her nipple found itself pertly pinched between his fingers as he gave a rolling, sampling squeeze, getting a happy squeak out of the girl. Alps loved that sound, and being able to intentionally bring it made him feel powerful. He felt his wings warm. It was so easy to tell now when he was bringing happiness. He could not imagine giving up the wings anymore.

“Even so?” asked the taller grey female. Alps leaned down and picked up the long silken sash that comprised the top part of Uri’s outfit and gazed at her.

“Even so, I think you would have more fun making it so your beloved was the one who could not walk tomorrow... with the help of a close friend.” Uri’s pupils overtook her irises, the girl backing up a little, sitting on the bed. She grinned sheepishly and spoke.

“Uh... Alps seems to have become more confident. You looking to play a game, hon?” Despite their size difference, with Alps being easily a head taller, the wolf was certain that he could not overpower the young royal guard, but he knew Misha and he both could do it. He grinned broadly at the girl, and spoke commandingly.

“I went to the noble and mighty Asuna capital and I’ve had their empress pinned beneath me, begging for my seed. That sort of thing leaves one with well deserved confidence.” Misha looked at him wide-eyed. Technically, he was not lying. Uri was speechless as well, and it gave Alps the opening he wanted. He slipped over to her, and looped the sash twice around her wrist, before pulling it up through one of the bars

to tie the bed up, then across to her other hand, up to the other bar, through and to the other hand again. In mere seconds, Uri pulled at her bindings, wide-eyed.

"I... I think he might have done this before." Misha's eyes were wide as well. Alps grinned sadistically at the lovely, but smaller Uri. She gave a mock fearful whimper, and Misha got on her knees on the bed.

"I am liking where this is going. Uri gets to be the naughty one with me all the time." She slipped in front of her, and brought her lips to the smaller female's chest. Uri gasped as that nipple was likely softly bitten, and tensed greatly.

"Nnnh... Gentle now... I'm not used to being the one tied up. Did you get this idea from our games, Alps?" she asked. He smiled to her and slipped a hand over Misha's backside, which she welcomed with a wiggle of her hips.

"Perhaps. It's been a while though. I hope I haven't gotten rusty." He crooned as he slipped behind the taller mountain grey. She stroked her hand downward and caressed Uri's tummy. Alps slipped his hand around his already fully erect shaft, and teased the velvety mound of the grey-furred lady wolf. She did not shy away from him. Alps flicked his ears a bit. If he wanted, he could just sink into her, but he knew Uri would protest, longing for such treatment herself. Alps slipped over to the drawer that his vest and such were kept in, and pulled out the cords that were used to strap the bed in place in a storm. He tied the cord to Uri's legs, just where her knee bent where she knelt on the bed. He drew each long cord to the leg of the bed on the side that the leg was on, which pulled her legs apart rather wide.

"It's a little different being the one tied..." Uri whispered, and then gasped. Alps sat down on the floor by the bed, facing forward with his back to the edge of the bed; his soft, warm wings pinned against it and just dropped his head back. His muzzle was the perfect size and perfect angle to tuck against her sweet-smelling mound. Misha was perhaps going to say something to her lover, but Alps' hand moved up easily and confidently between the taller girl's thighs, two fingers spreading her already wet entrance easily. She groaned instead of spoke, losing what she intended to say. She bit her lover instead, who gave a matching groan as Alps began to work his hand without shame in those clutching wet, powerful walls. He used his thumb to wriggle and rub on that fleshy nub, biding his time before he showed them both something unique.

"He's just as good as ever and so much more ... willing..." panted Misha finally. Uri was voiceless, huffing as she found herself so trapped and helpless against him. This was new to her, perhaps. At least, it was likely new to her with a male. He fluttered his tongue over those heavily blood-laden petals, feeling her pulse on that flexible, eager muscle as he pushed it deep inside her tangy sex, but there was a new pulse he was just getting used to feeling from them both. Their pleasure he felt in his little wings. He was sure he could get used to it, but at first, he found it rather distracting. It was like a soft, delightful tugging each time a shock of pleasure went through each one of them. Alps cupped his mouth tighter to Uri and suckled, grinding

his tongue tightly to her clit, forcing her to buckle as best she could so tightly tied. He thought about the things he wanted to do to her. She wanted to be fucked, she was never shy about that, but how would he do it? The visions and options that passed through his head aroused him intensely, making his cock tick nervously against his tummy from time to time, and drool pre silently into the soft fur of his belly.

“You want him inside you, don’t you, Uri?” Misha asked. Alps grinned. He knew this game already. She liked teasing her lover, getting her almost foaming at the mouth with lust. What she did next he didn’t expect. The grey wolf female drew back away from his penetrating fingers, her wetness covering his hand to the wrist, and she knelt over his lap. This was not what he had planned on, but he was curious about her. She stroked his cock as she leaned back a little, to give her beloved a clear view of its pinkened, hot, heavily swollen form, almost bluish at the tip from how tightly that skin was stretched over trained and unyielding muscle. Alps ached for her touch as she stroked him, but did not move his mouth, his view confined to the underside of a twitching black tail as Uri’s inner flesh jerked softly around his tongue, wanting very much what Misha was making her look at.

“Yes, my love... Oh yes, please let me have him... All the way inside me... I want to feel his hips to mine... Oh dear love...” He pistoned his tongue inside her a little heavier at that point. The white lupine wanted her to think of that turgid shaft doing just that in her spongy, tightly clutching walls. He was almost ready to give her the reward he intended for them both but then sucked in a deep, anxious breath. Misha took his entire cock in a single stroke. He had certainly not expected that, but she was soaking wet as she gripped him inside her, and he could feel the soft back and forth motion of her needful hips, even as she perhaps tried to hold still. Had she changed in her preference so much as to yearn for him? His surprise at the suddenness of it almost cast him too far.

“Nnk!” He grunted, tightening, nearly spilling his seed at how blindingly tight she was. He was her only male partner, after all. The white wolf focused on Uri’s pleasure instead. Push his essence forward... find his aura, find hers... Lock the two, entwine them... Stroke her... Stroke her... Stroke her...

“HaaaAAAAAAA-nnnph!” Uri’s climax slammed over her like a collapsing building, making her lover squeeze tight around Alps. The queen’s beloved then slipped his hand down over Misha’s sex.

“I have him inside me, love... all to myself... I’m gonna hold him in me until I cum... Isn’t that unfair...?” she said, beginning to ride him. Alps quivered a bit at that. He wanted to give her the same shock that he did to Uri, who was winded, quivering, and stunned by it. It was a wonderful trick to have been taught by the Asuna empress, though raw sex was still his favorite. Still, this new trick would be fun to show this pair. He let Misha begin to stroke herself over his cock, knowing she was leaning back to let Uri see that idolized cock slipping in and out of her lover as she struggled to recover from a sudden, forced climax.

"You better not... make him cum... You said that was mine." She was heaving with shocked exasperation.

"Uh oh, I think he'll cum before I can pop, love!" she teased. Her voice was tense, but playful. He loved how playful and light-hearted these two girls could be.

"Think again." Alps said, looking into her eyes, pushing his fingertips to her clit, and hitting her as hard as he could with the essence of his pleasure.

"Oh *sweet lily FUCK!*" cried the larger mountain grey as her sex contracted painfully around his cock and her honey spilled down his aching sack. "HaaaAAH!" she cried, shaking, holding his shoulders.

"See? That's what you get." Uri panted.

"Alps, what did you..." The white lupine put a finger to Misha's lips and smiled.

"I am gonna tongue your pretty Uri. I want you to help. I want us to get her off harder than she's ever gotten before." He felt Misha squeeze around him again. As she recovered from the shock of her forced release, Alps moved his head back, and began pushing his tongue deep inside the tangy honeypot of his dark-furred friend. She bucked her hips softly, before Misha figured out what Alps meant by help. Working hard to keep his cock inside her, she leaned down and pushed her lips to Uri's sex, her tongue stroking over Alps' tongue erotically as she teased her lover's clit with quick, flickering strokes of that strong and practiced pink muscle. He did not use that little trick anymore. He wanted this gift to be entirely from him and Misha. The quivering mass of the girl's smaller young lover made it obvious that it would not take long. Misha began to ride Alps' hips slowly, but more in a lusty, wanting fashion than trying to spark her climax again. Alps knew he could not handle a hard ride from her at that point. He'd certainly burst. Tying Uri up really got the former slave going. Playing with them so happily thrilled him.

Alps shot his tongue up into her as hard as he could, mouth opened wide, and his body burning with need as he felt the sexy sensation of Misha's tongue joining his in licking up into the writhing, whimpering, quivering Uri. He was thankful as Misha stopped moving to focus on her lover. There would be time for pleasure for her. She might enjoy a ride on that same tongue later.

"Yes... Oh yes love, thank yooooou... Oh this feels so good..." Uri was certainly easy to read, and the pair doubled their efforts, not letting up. This was a fast rise to release but their time was limited. Teasing was not what they had the time for. Misha groaned into Uri's sex, and Alps was sure that it was to vibrate her tongue, to make her cum harder, but the grey lover's hips began to stroke him again. He whined, needful and frantic. He panted into Uri's sex, letting her rest slightly from his constant and rhythmic pumping.

“Misha, c-calm yourself. I’m close to squirting as it is...”

“Cum in her Alps... She deserrrrrves it.” Uri crooned.

“I’ll cum...” Alps warned again, as Misha failed to yield. He tried hard to hold out, but he could not focus on licking Uri anymore, and he certainly could not use his essence on her this close to his climax.

“Do it Alps... Fill me.” Misha whimpered loudly. She was going to cum. He had to hold out a little bit longer, but could already feel his sack drawing tight. It was becoming almost involuntary because of the pressure of their pleasure on his wings. It was such a pleasurable experience that he was still getting used to. He gave in.

“I’m cumming!” he cried, letting both of them know. It was all Misha needed, her sex clamping down tight as she exploded around him. Alps felt himself flung hard into climax, not having intended to give it to Misha, knowing that Uri wanted it. It left him only one sure, but steamy option. He rode out his climax and held Misha’s hips as she shook happily against him in bliss. She then began pitching her hips heavily back and forth, a bit longer, perhaps just rutting against him for the sake of sex with him before returning to Uri’s pleasure. Alps groaned as she slowly continued working his cock inside her, but returned his attention to the black-furred female. Both tongues abused her wonderfully, and she pulled against her bindings as she tightened and relaxed for the oncoming catastrophic release. When it hit, Alps had her honey spill down his cheeks and neck and chest. His legs kicked out a bit as he felt the shock of her climax rushing like wind over his wings. Misha leaned back, catching her breath as Alps fluttered his tongue over her clit to let her ride out her climax hard.

“Good girl! Let it all out for Alpsie!” she cried, stroking him back to his fullest arousal inside her. It was not long before he was ready again. She slipped off of him, and then watched as Alps rolled onto his knees and untied Uri’s legs.

“D-Don’t untie me yet, I can’t stand.” She whimpered so pitifully.

“You think I’m done with you?!” Alps growled lustfully. He picked up her hips, her hands balling into fists as she was suspended slightly and then pushed up against the wall, her body bridging between her male lover and the wall of the cabin. He slammed into her, making her cry out.

“Oh by dawn’s light Alps!” cried Uri, obviously not unhappy with the treatment. His cock was as rigid as ever, throbbing with frantic need as he hilted himself inside her. Uri squeaked again and again as Misha crooned in wonder as the sudden frenzied attack on her mate. Alps was not known by them, at least, to be rough, but there he was, threatening to push the black-furred lady wolf out through the wall, hips shocking her with each powerful stroke. He gritted his teeth as he pulled her legs up so they rested over the crook of his elbows as he held her up, occasionally pushing into her and

letting the wall act as resistance and sometimes pulling her to meet him, shaking her quite heavily as her breasts bounced hard on her chest. Misha squirmed as she watched. Despite a bit surprised, she seemed happy with the ravaging her mate was getting.

“That’s it, Alps. She’s had *this* coming for a long, long time.” Alps felt Misha’s hand on his haunches, stroking him perhaps just to feel the force and power he was using on Uri. Alps gritted his teeth, panting through them heavily as he fucked the girl harder. He had to make sure that Uri remembered this for a while. The loud thumping of Uri’s shoulders against the wall was a din he took pleasure in. “Harder Alps! Fuck her harder!” Misha growled, delighting in the abuse of her naughty and strong-willed mate.

“M-Misha! I d-don’t think he c-can!” cried Uri. “Oh fuck!” Alps did. He drove himself harder into her, and she squeaked with each impact. He wanted to cum inside her. That’s what he was working for now. Her pleasure would happen too, or it would wait a moment. This was for one purpose only. To feel what it was like to serve the pleasure of a very hungry Letai wolf. His wings’ light overpowered the candles in the room, white light showing the true color of everything Alps could see on the wall and the bed, though Uri’s face was covered in the shadow of his body, since his wings were mostly behind him.

“Alps, that’s so beautiful...” Misha marveled with soft, anxious panting. She placed her hand on one of those wings, but was leaning against his back a little. Alps knew why, without even turning around. He could feel her pleasure. She was stroking her clit with her fingertips in mounting desire to join in the fun, or perhaps fantasizing about being the next one to enjoy that kind of ravaging. Alps folded back his ears. He liked thinking about Misha masturbating to what she saw, but he was jarred from that line of thought as wet heat splashed his crotch, and Uri screamed. Alps fucked her harder against the wall, shaking that scream out of her.

“Heavens...” came a soft feminine voice from out in the hall. He was not certain who it was. Had Nita been watching through a crack in the door? Had it been Luna? Was she seeing what kind of lover her son had become? The shock of that image played itself through his naughty mind, skimming over even an image of her on her knees, hand slipped between her thighs to enjoy the show, and the taboo of it jerked the climax right to the front of the line.

“Fuck!” Alps barked lewdly, spraying his essence hard in Uri. She squealed in recognition as he ground her tight against the wall, and Misha gave a panicked little sound of determination, and then a sinking, satisfied groan as she stroked her sex to release. Alps tilted his head back, and became aware of little balls of light, not very large, no more than fireflies swirling around him. That was new. He panted heavily, still throbbing in Uri as he let the last few drops of his seed trickle inside her.

“Ohhhh...” Uri crooned, feeling so satisfied. Neither commented on the lights, so Alps was not sure if he was the only one that could see them. They then snapped in a flash to him, as if absorbed. He grunted at the shock of pleasure that ripped through him at their impact, knowing he gave another hard squirt to Uri by her happy yelp, and then he drew out of her, letting her knees back down to the bed. Alps turned and sat on the bed, his own legs tired, and then gasped loudly as Misha’s mouth overtook his cock. She certainly didn’t seem to hate at least one male lover. She thankfully did not attempt to work him to release again, seeming interested in sucking the taste of her panting, sputtering mate off his softening shaft. Alps leaned back a bit. He felt the dull ache in his legs that told him he would be able to walk, but he certainly wasn’t likely to be running any large distances any time soon.

“Oh that’s such a slutty image.” Misha giggled. Alps looked up at her with a sex-doped expression. The grey-furred female nodded over to Uri. She hung with her head down, arms out and up. She was still tied, heavily breathing but obviously unconscious. Her thighs were parted very wide from how heavily she was sagging from her wrist restraints, and there was a pool of thick, shamefully copious seed under her sex, connected by a thick, drooling streamer of it pouring from her. Alps blushed at that. She looked about as hard-fucked and used for pleasure as a girl possibly could. Alps looked back to Misha meekly. “... Don’t you dare apologize. I am gonna enjoy making her remember that when I pleasure her to get her off harder, Alps. You have no idea how often you come up as a subject of fantasy during sex. For both of us.” Alps’ ears went scarlet again.

About twenty minutes passed of just stroking, kissing, gentle caressing, and a lot of use of already abused towel to get the girls cleaned up at least enough to be presentable on deck for their departure. Alps did not look forward to saying goodbye, but he would do everything to make sure that it was not a final farewell. They got themselves composed and headed up on deck, leaving Alps to get a little more cleaned up, since he would be traveling with the scent of heavy, aggressive sex still on him. They both seemed to like the thought that everyone would know what he did, and be reminded of it the entire time they were downwind. They enjoyed more how much that thought seemed to embarrass Alps.

After the pair left, Alps sat on the now ruffled blankets and sheets and pillows and stretched a little, looking for a new towel or something to clean up a little bit more as the scent of his lusty exchange with his friends hung in the air. He would at least try to make himself tolerable when he got up on deck. He was sure Lira knew what his leaving with the sea-faring ladies was about, but he didn’t want to make it that blatant the whole foreseeable journey. He got himself cleaned up with someone’s kerchief, and pulled on his trousers. He finally put on his uniform blazer once he had cooled down enough. The open shoulders of the garment did little to really cool him down if he had been active. He pulled on his dark shoes, and as he looked up, he let go of the shoe he was pulling on, almost falling back on the bed. He sat on it heavily to avoid falling back, and peered at the figure in the corner, leaning against the wall by a portal too small to just climb through.

“Ellis! How long have you been in here?!” Alps cried. There was no way she could have slipped in without him noticing. She had to have seen that whole encounter. He felt himself go scarlet. Why did it embarrass him so much? She had apparently seen him with Luna and Ceriss, so this was no different, but he felt more reserved around her for some reason, as if Luna had watched, and not her. She was holding a light tan leather pack in her hand, barely above the floor, seeming relaxed. The light in the corner where she had been standing seemed to slowly grow, as if the sun were coming up and revealing the contents of a cave just below the horizon. It was a spooky effect. Could she obscure herself the way Ceriss could?

“I brought you a gift. It’s nice to see you too, Alps.” She approached him with a smile, her pupil-free eyes gazing at him blind-but-still-knowing. He felt the insides of his ears absolutely searing.

“You were bound to see that eventually, sneaking around like you do.” Alps stated, trying to make it her fault. He was not ashamed of it, so why was he embarrassed.

“I trust you have made a final decision concerning your wings?” the fox asked, seeming to not care at all about Alps’ embarrassment. The white wolf huffed softly. He then leaned back a bit, flittering those wings a little.

“Yeah, I decided to keep them. I guess you know that already, though.” He was beginning to think she just hid and watched him all the time. It was extremely unnerving. The things she must think of him!

“I did know. So I bring you this to help.” She placed the pack on the bed. Alps turned a bit and carefully opened the leather bag.

“We’re on the damn ocean. You can’t just go shopping.” He peered into the bag. It looked like clothing of some kind.

“I brought it with me, don’t be silly.” Ellis’ tone was completely casual, as if she had not seen Alps bolster his essence energy amid the sex-tortured screams of his friends. He pulled the garment out of the bag. It was a heavy black fabric cape which drew over the shoulders and cinched with a short gold chain and clasp over the chest. Also, there was a single pauldron that went on his right shoulder. It was made of several layers of dense, polished leather, with three silver bands that looped over the top of it to act as an additional guard for the leather itself. There was a silver chain that linked perhaps to his outfit or maybe to armor. Attached to the pauldron was a short sleeve of chain mail to offer the arm it covered a little additional protection. There was also a thicker belt for him to wear that had a pouch to carry Ressaia in, he assumed. The outfit looked like it was for serious travel and even battle. Alps was not trained to wear armor, so a single pauldron was perhaps as much protection as he could easily

wear, but it looked like it could stop a pretty stout blow, and made him feel a little more matched to Nidaja. He looked up at Ellis.

“Why are you giving me these things? They are fine quality. I might not be the best person to provide them to.”

“You will want to hide your wings. The cape is there for that. The shoulder guard is because you are not a warrior, but you will defend your friends if you must. You should at least hope to come away without injury.” Alps marveled at the gifts a moment, quietly touched.

“And the belt?” he asked wistfully.

“It is to keep your pants on. This has seemed something of a challenge for you.” Her words were blunt, and his ears went scarlet. She murmured after, “... I tease. You should laugh more.” He was unable to laugh just because he could not believe she made a joke. There was a short pause. “Aris... You are ready for this. You need little else than you have.”

“Where did I go when the Shadowfall collapsed?” he asked, not even knowing why he asked it, looking in his new pack. There was no answer. He sighed and looked up. Of course. Ellis was gone. “Damn it.”

The sea-spray moistened his black uniform as the boat lurched in the water, Lira and Nidaja manning the oars. The water was rough, but, as promised, the rocks were a lot farther apart when they were this close to them, and it was not too challenging for the skilled pair to get the boat to shore. In the craft Alps occupied was Nita, Nidaja, Lira, himself and his mother. Another boat piloted by Lyat and Reika carried most of their supplies, and Vhale as well. It followed close behind them. Both boats would just be left there, perhaps forever, or until some traveler found them and decided he wanted them. Nidaja's ship was already turning to sail back to Diera. It might be the last time Alps saw her sails. There was a bit of a heavy feeling to his feet as he slipped out of the boat to help haul it ashore. Lira was already up against the forest edge, the trees coming nearly right down to the ocean. It was a perfect spot to come ashore without really being noticed. Unless someone was visible right on the edge of the water, they would not have likely seen the group come ashore. It was well planned.

The sun was already high in the sky, and the trip over the water in direct sunlight had made Alps feel rather warm, so he was glad to get under the trees. It was good to be on solid ground, but he knew for much of his journey this would be unfriendly ground.

After everyone was safely in the shade and no longer visible from the ocean, enjoying the obscurity the tall, nicely spaced trees gave, they divvied out the supplies as

fairly as they could. Whale shouldered a great deal deliberately, but it seemed to be that he wanted to lag behind enough not to be too close to Alps, who he still seemed anxious about, or even fearful of. It unsettled Alps a bit, but he would tolerate it, and try to be as friendly around Whale as possible. He had hoped that as they formulated the plan they were using, he would treat the former slave a bit more normally, but the new wings seemed to have him spooked more than ever. Alps figured the effect would wear off when it was obvious that he had not changed, he just had wings now.

Alps took the new pack that Ellis had given him. He took out the cape and the shoulder guard and had Nidaja help him put it on, since he had never worn anything like it. She asked where he got it, and seemed unsurprised when he told her. She seemed perfectly comfortable with the fact that the fox came along. Perhaps she had met her once or twice before and had grown to trust her. She didn't really talk about it, but Alps suspected as much. He trusted Ellis, even if he didn't understand what she was up to.

Nita liked the addition to his outfit, and suggest he wear it more once they got back. Lira said it looked silly with only one shoulder guard, but Alps forgave her comment. He was not trying to impress her. His friends were already perfectly happy with him. Lyat and Reika yammered back and forth in Asuna, and were quite happy to have Lira walk with them and talk in their language with her. It was a nice novelty to hear the language spoken by a wolf. Alps walked alongside Nita and Nidaja, and Luna stayed with Whale, who seemed to cheer up a bit in her presence.

The first two hours of their journey happened uneventfully enough. There were a lot of trees, and they became more and more dense. Lira assured them that there would be, if they continued to travel north, a dried up river bed that would allow fast, relatively safe travel affording them a view far ahead, and reduce the chances of being spotted at any great distance in any other direction. It would lead them a few miles north of Luca, where Alps intended to stop, but it would be several days of travel to get there. The forest made Alps need for wearing the cape a little less overheating, and the fact that it was a cape, and not a cloak made it the perfect accessory to hide his wings, since it gave him a bit more mobility. The pouch he had for putting Ressaia was perfect for the orb, and he felt a little sturdier with the shoulder guard even if Lira thought it was silly. Soon, they were plodding along and speaking to one another, joking, and actually having a good time. Lira would shush them occasionally and jump up to the lower branches of a tree to scout a little ahead for their safety. Seeing her jump like that was a reminder to Alps that she was an essence user too. They had six essence-users with them. The white lupine male figured that so many rarely travelled together, so a bandit might get a painful surprise if they misjudged this group.

As the warmest part of the day settled over them, they came out of rather dense underbrush into the dried up riverbed that had been promised to them. It was dusty, hot, and rather bleak in comparison to the rich forest. Alps knew immediately it would be less comfortable for him to travel in it, but he would tolerate it.

“This is a faster way to travel though...” Nidaja told him, seeming to realize he was distressed by the heat. “We will walk harder in the morning and late evening, and camp a bit during the day for our meal. It’ll be fine.” Alps smiled wryly as Lira hopped a good 18 feet into the air and onto a branch to scout ahead. As far as Alps could tell there were just a few rocks strewn along the riverbed and nothing worth looking at in either direction. He glanced to Nidaja again and rumbled,

“It’s alright, I will probably get used to it after a while. This is certainly not the most uncomfortable I have been. At least I get to be with all my friends. You have no idea how grateful I am for that.” He felt a wave of happiness from the general and the queen that he expected, and one from Reika that he did not. He feared that she might be getting too attached to him, and she would have to go back to Rios when all this was done. Alps didn’t want to see her have to say goodbye like that, but she may have already set herself up for that heartbreak. He was considering that when he heard an angry tone from the tree above.

“Shit! Damnit, *draw up!*” Alps looked at Lira, dumbfounded. Nidaja pulled Alps forward with her, and Lyat pulled Nita back with him and Vhale. They seemed to know what Lira meant by that, and a second later, he understood. Twelve of the rocks that he had seen were not rocks. They were Uruk, hunched up and covered in extra clay to give them irregular shapes. He had not heard of such a trick before because raiding Uruk parties did not hide, they just attacked. These apparently were programmed to attack travelers by surprise.

“Really? We haven’t been on land for half a day and we get attacked?” Nidaja barked in anger.

“Sorry guys! I saw what they were a minute too late. This is new!” Lira jumped down and drew her slender long sword. Luna moved alongside the queen to her defense with Vhale and Lyat. Alps felt better that his beloved was well protected, and he felt pretty safe with Nidaja. The Uruk were drawing closer, moving briskly but not running. The white-furred former slave was given a closer look at them as a result. They had almost egg-shaped bodies with oddly attached arms, thin and bug-like, digitigrade legs, and leather jacket-like clothing, but only the jacket. It seemed more to reduce weathering than to actually cover or protect them like armor. Each had two softly glowing oval crystal eyes, except one, which had four. Alps remembered that this meant there would be a larger variety of things this Uruk could do. This was likely the leader of the other eleven. Each had some kind of weapon. Most used a sharp spear with a blade bound to the front like a hook of some kind. Alps had not seen weapons like that before, but it was obvious that it was to compensate for the shortness in stature of the four to five foot tall golems, giving them added reach. They were caked with mud to disguise them as rocks, but had an almost turtle shell texture up close, made of hardened enchanted clay and other materials. Some parts looked waxy and soft, but mostly they looked hard and uncaring.

“Brother!” cried Reika, “Is we being allowed to break them? Asuna is not harming dirty Uruks, we will be in trouble!”

“If we is seen fighting along with Amani wolfs, there is being trouble anyways! We break them!” He drew a very heavy-looking two-handed sword with a single edge. It was so thick that it looked more like a very long axe than a sword.

“Reika gets to break Uruk?” the girl cried.

“Yes.” Lyat stated. The hyena girl screamed with delight, clutching bone. She reached into her pack.

“Finally!” She pulled out the dye that she used to put a face on her weapon.

“What the hell is she doing?!” Lira cried, moving up with Nidaja and Alps as Reika lagged behind. In mere moments, the Uruk would be upon them. Alps was not a fighter, he was not sure what he would do, but he would try to distract or deflect the Uruk to allow the real fighters to have at them.

“Reika is making ready for breaking!” She took her thumb with black dye and drew a line over the top of each of Bone’s eyes, angling the two lines down in the center. Alps stifled a laugh. She made Bone have angry eyes for the fight. Why was that so funny to him? He gritted his teeth, grinning as he looked forward, his heart racing.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Lira said, bracing her foot behind her. “Protect Nita with your lives!” A crimson ball of blazing hot essence flew past her, knocking back the closest Uruk so hard that its limbs scattered over the riverbed for thirty yards back.

“Protect yourself!” Nita barked.

“Nita! Reserve your energy!” Nidaja said, and drew her gleaming ornate sword. The long-distance attack helped the odds a small amount. Alps agreed with Nidaja, however. That energy was finite for the queen, she would need to use it only if one got through and she was endangered more than Lyat could help. Alps turned and slipped his hand into his pouch, taking out the orb. It snapped into a staff, shocking Lira a bit. She had to shake her head a bit and focus on what was coming. They had slowed down as they approached, the clicking orders received from their leader moving them into a C shape so that they could surround the group a little as they rushed in. The top of the C unfortunately met with Reika first, who had charged ahead a little. She knocked a hooking spear to the side and just put her shoulder into the one she met, putting it on its back on the ground. Alps thought she might remove its weapon in that moment, as he expected that, but instead she jumped on top of it and just ripped its arm completely off, the weapon dropping from that before she rapidly and savagely beat its head in with duel-wielded Bone and arm, wind-milling it, shattering and scattering its eyes as others rushed away from her, not wanting any part of that.

Alps saw Lira engage one and Nidaja another. The green-furred guide reached hers first, and showed prowess with her slender blade, taking advantage of great speed, deflecting the weapon of her attacker and removing one of its “eyes” in the next hit, before it fell back, and another began dueling more effectively with her. Nidaja had two at once move up to her, so she had her hands immediately full, deflecting the weapons with ease, but they seemed to be able to keep enough pressure on her to prevent their demise as the other half of the group proceeded toward Nita, including the one with four eyes. Alps gritted his teeth. He decided if he attacked the most important of them, it would give Lyat better odds because it was likely that more would fight him and be distracted to protect their higher ranked Uruk. He sprinted to head off the group, and immediately had the attention of one of the normal ones. He used his staff, thankfully light with enough reach that he knocked that pointed weapon aside, and he struck the Uruk away. He felt a strange little shock through the staff, but ignored it. He had not really hit anything with it before.

The one with four eyes immediately turned on him, and drew a knife from inside its leather jacket. Alps held his staff at the ready, but it did not immediately approach him. Alps suddenly feared he was just being distracted, and turned to look at the other Uruk and defend himself if he was being attacked from behind. He did not understand what it was he was looking at. The Uruk was stabbing relentlessly at nothing. There was nothing in front of it, and it was attacking it with its spear, then twitching wildly, and attacking again. Alps looked at the staff again, and then at the four-eyed Uruk. He moved toward it, and it backed up, taking a defensive posture. It was afraid of him. What could cause that?

In a flash of insight, Alps understood. The staff could absorb essence attacks, he knew that, but the Uruk operated on essence in those crystal eyes. If that essence were disrupted, the Uruk would not function the way it was “programmed” to. He narrowed his eyes. Suddenly, his simple staff was a lot more formidable weapon for the fights that he knew would come. Greatly encouraged, Alps called out to the hyena girl, who had succeeded in pulling off her victim’s other arm and was getting up to fight more.

“Reika! I messed that one up! Fix him up!” Alps nodded toward the malfunctioning Uruk. She held up Bone and jumped up and down. She bolted toward the indicated Uruk, and Alps gritted his teeth, seeing three of the others squaring off against Luna and Lyat. He had to free up Lira or Nidaja to help him. He decided to help Nidaja, as Lira was only fighting one, the other being more defensive.

Nidaja was not tiring, and she seemed to be trying to figure out the pattern of her attackers the way she taught him to in the few times they sparred.

“Let me slow one down!” Alps barked boldly. One of Nidaja’s attackers turned to face him too late to bring its spear to bear, and Alps slashed it with his staff right across the middle.

“Alps, your weapon won’t work, you have to break or remove the eyes!” Alps then turned and faced the four-eyed Uruk again, which backed off when the former slave’s back was not turned. It was not stupid, it did not want to be touched, and for good reason. “What the hell?” Nidaja cried, seeing the one that Alps hit drop on the ground and start running sideways, going nowhere. She then put essence energy into her arm and cleaved the still-active Uruk in half. The eyes still had to be destroyed, but it didn’t work as well in two pieces, so that last task of jabbing those crystals out of its oval top was easy. She then did the same to the one Alps damaged.

“My staff messes up their essence!” Alps said with pride. “Looks like I can help a lot after all!” he laughed, before bolting toward Lira. Nidaja moved quickly toward Nita. Reika used Bone to savagely crush the face and eyes of the air-jabbing Uruk, laughing maniacally. There seemed to be a lot of pent up hate for the golems that the girl needed to work out. Alps was happy to oblige. He popped the one-eyed defensive Uruk in the back, making it just start walking off in one direction. “Reika! He wants to leave the party!” The hyena bolted past him.

“I can handle this, Alps, help Nita!” cried Lira, seeming to enjoy the exchange of blocking and fighting with the single Uruk left. She was a good fighter, and did not seem to be getting tired. It gave Alps more respect for her. She was small, but a powerhouse. He turned in time to see the higher ranking Uruk backing away from everyone and observing. It was going badly for the Uruk. Two already lay smashed to bits from Reika. One was in two parts from Nidaja, and the other was having its eyes removed as it flailed helplessly on the ground. Another was fighting a battle it likely would not win against Lira. Reika was chasing another that was ruined by that horrible stick Alps was carrying. One was blown to smithereens by a fireball that was cast by a powerful essence user. One moved to defend the leader, and three others inched closer to a large and dangerous-looking Lyat. Nidaja found herself headed off by the one with four eyes, and held at bay by its rapidly flailing guardian.

“You is used to Asuna doomed to die in mines, horrible curse thing!” Lyat barked in the most emotional tone he’d heard. He was joyful at getting to finally kill Uruk, just as much as his sister. He swung his mighty sword, slicing right through a spear, sheering the top of the first Uruk off completely, and smashing the face of the next in a single swing of that heavy blade. Two were gone just like that.

“Asuna is scariest things!” Reika cried triumphantly, tackling her victim from behind, rolling it, and smashing the eyes out with the butt of her bone-club. “Ahahahahaaaa!” She wailed with laughter. The remaining attacker attempting to move against Lyat backed away quickly, but it was not quick enough. He put a foot into the middle of it, his kick so hard it flew back fifteen feet, and then, a mighty jump and his sword came down in the top and middle of it. Alps could not believe Nidaja fought him and survived. He had to have gone easy on her. Or at least, he didn’t have reason to hate her so much. Nidaja bested her two-eyed opponent handily enough right as Lira

sheered one eye, then the other so neatly with a flourish of her slender blade from her silently dropping opponent. It was artistic and elegant.

"He's bolting!" Nidaja barked, pointing out the four-eyed last remaining fighter. He was unbelievably fast, perhaps an ability of one of the additional eyes. Alps gritted his teeth.

"He's going for reinforcements!" But no sooner did he say that than he heard a loud call from behind him.

"*Linista'for-stanararthu'ren!*" The voice was his mother's, and the effect was instantaneous. Roots erupted from the ground just ahead of the fleeing target. It was moving too fast to keep from running into them. It was immediately wrapped in the explosively growing tendrils. Luna held her hand up, her face stern and majestic. Nita seemed doe-eyed as she watched, very much appreciating the show of essence-technique. "*Reneldanadae!*" Alps felt suddenly glad he did not see what followed happen to an Amanian or an Asuna. He might have gotten sick. The roots jerked away from each other in all different directions, tearing the Uruk into six pieces. Lira and Nita both shouted in amazement. Nidaja applauded.

"The Letai are back, you piece of shit!" the general cried. She looked around furtively. "Are there anymore?"

"No!" Lira stated, having already hopped up in a nearby tree at the edge of the river bed. "Oh dear heavens! That lasted less than three minutes!"

"That was a slaughter!" laughed Nidaja. *Clack!* The sound came from Reika. She was tossing crystal eyes into the air and hitting them over the trees with Bone.

"Reika is being so glad she came!" the hyena girl cried.

"Alps, you were so valiant!" Nita crooned, scooping up her lover and hugging him close. He felt better about himself after the fight, but he could not just blow up Uruk from a hundred feet out the way the one fawning over him could, so he could not get a big head about it. "That staff is a lot more useful than I had first felt it to be. We will perhaps want to discuss strategy around that." Nidaja joined her sister in ruffling Alps.

"Indeed! I had no idea. Don't think Alps did either." The white male nodded at the general, letting her know she was right.

"Doesn't pay to underestimate a healer, does it?" asked Lira, smiling up at Luna.

"Not at all." Luna chuckled. "I am not likely to do that to anyone but an Uruk though. Does a lot of damage to the essence in an area to commit such a brutal act." She smiled at her son. "Very good work and quick thinking Alps. You were definitely the right one to bring along."

"If all our fights go so well, I should think this would make a very inspiring tale." Lira stated. "But, for our sake, I hope we don't have many battles between here and there. We just fought a small raiding group. The forts will be much better defended. We will not want to go in without a plan, so no running off all crazy with confidence, okay?" she asked.

"Hey, you don't have to tell me. I'm a seasoned fighter." Nidaja laughed. "Though, we might have to worry about some of us more than others." She nodded over to Reika, who was rolling the midsection of one of the Uruk around happily. She had deeply enjoyed the fight. Alps found himself doubting she experienced any fear at all through all of it. He felt fear though, and now that the adrenalin and excitement was wearing off, he felt a little sick, and sat down off the path, under a tree to rest a moment. Nita sat down too while the others got the supplies back together and boosted their morale even higher by happily talking about the very once-sided fight. Alps looked to Nita and murmured softly,

"It won't always be like that." She nodded softly, still smiling as she looked at the others.

"It won't, but the rewards will continue to be greater. If we accomplish what we are setting out to do, this fight will hardly even be memorable." Alps nodded in agreement. At the very least, history would not likely remember it, and that was sobering because it was, to date, his greatest act of valor for his beloved queen.

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 8

The sky was dark with low-hanging clouds that swept in front of two moons, one a sliver and one nearly full, hanging large and low in the sky just over the perimeter wall that divided the courtyard from the substantial limestone cliff that lead down to the ocean. The pale silvery light cast long shadows up to the manor itself. Outside was Ceriss in her Nita essence-disguise, appearing to just be sitting on a bench by a fountain that slowly bubbled its pure water from the ground below. An occasional ocean breeze rustled the tall, slender firs that bordered the manor on the side facing the city proper. It seemed like a very peaceful scene as Leal and the lady thief skidded to a halt on the cobblestone walk that cut across the well-manicured central garden. Right by the "Queen" was an ornate garden lamp, an intricate lantern at the end of a tall wrought iron pole to cast light on the pretty lady wolf.

"I don't see anyone." proclaimed the grey lupine guard. As he said that, he saw a bluish light rise from behind Ceriss, flicker a bit, and then be whisked away as if by the breeze. It was faint, almost like a glowing wisp of smoke.

"The spirits of guardians past tell me they come." 'Nita' said in a soft tone. A spirit? That thing was a spirit? That sight did not comfort Leal. Ceriss was able to talk to ghosts? Even as he knew what she was, he was never quite sure if ghosts were even real. Until he met her though, he was not even really certain the Letai were real, or they had nearly the power the stories all seemed to agree that they had. That had been made perfectly clear all too recently as truth. He shook away his troubled mind. He did not have time to worry about it now.

"Nita's a spirit-keener? I thought she was more into fire magics?" Neit slipped behind the taller guard. She then squeaked as Lunaris slapped her backside, flailing at him wildly. "No! NO!" she scolded. The large black wolf grinned and nodded to the manor.

"Up on the roof, thief. I know you know how." He beamed toothily at her. Leal folded his ears back. Lunaris was about as bold as he could ever be afraid to be.

"*Former* thief, thank you!" she barked, rubbing her bottom indignantly.

“Fine, but I need you watching the perimeter. If you see anyone lurking around outside the fight, watch them carefully. If they leave when the fight heats up, I want you to shadow them. Do not fail in that, Neit.” She huffed, and moved swiftly toward the wall, breaking into a dead run. Leal flinched, as it seemed she would just barrel headlong into it because she was not slowing down. She turned a little, taking an angle toward it, making it appear like she was trying to turn away at the last second but was moving too fast. Instead of hitting the wall, she jumped and took four rising steps up the side of the wall at an angle, catching a support beam, pulling herself up, then launching up to an under-support for the third floor, pulling up that, and then scaling a wooden trim at the corner of the building, right up to the clay-tiled roof. Leal was quietly impressed. It also made a little more sense as to why Lunarix chose the girl. He was not stupid; he may very well have picked the best one he could under the circumstances. The guard turned to speak with his captain only to find that he was gone. He stood alone in the courtyard with the queen’s double. They stood out there in awkward silence for easily ten minutes before Leal had to speak up.

“Interesting evening.” The guard noted as he walked up closer to Ceriss.

“We should kiss.” Ceriss stated flatly. Leal folded his ears back. Was she kidding?

“That would distract me.” He remarked.

“And encourage an all-out attack.” The lady wolf answered in a whisper.

“Why?” he asked.

“Think about it. Would the queen do such a thing with a lowly guard if anyone was watching? They will believe it’s just the two of us out here.”

“It *is* just the two of us.” Leal retorted. He was fearful of his captain’s reaction to seeing it, especially if he found out his subordinate’s other indiscretions with someone who held the image of her majesty. ‘Nita’ glowered at him.

“You start kissing me now, or tomorrow, I disguise myself as you, and go down to the shops in Diera and steal embarrassing items in broad daylight.” Leal winced at that, and then pulled the queen close, deeply kissing her. Leal imagined this would be particularly confusing to the thief, who thought this really was Nita. He felt himself almost on fire with sensation as he kissed her. The imminent danger made him more sensitive. Time seemed to stand still for him and the disguised priestess before he finally heard a soft shuffle. He pulled out of the kiss and turned in time to see they were surrounded. “Nita” straightened her robes.

"Halt!" shouted Leal nervously. He felt almost weak with anxiousness. He had been in scuffles before, but not like this. A variety of lupines, two female, six male, all stood in a circle around them. Ceriss had intended to make it so they could be surrounded, perhaps to encourage more out at one time.

"You had better have a very good reason for interrupting me in my private manor." The faux-queen stated. Leal was careful to note that there was no worry or fear in her voice. It sounded the same as when she addressed Neit.

"The era of your rule, and the slow decline of our species, has come to an end." One of the eight stepped forward, a slightly older female. Her long golden fur made her look a lot like Misty, though her hair was pulled under a rounded red felt hat that made her look kind of like a furry yellow mushroom.

"I still seem to be the ruler of this nation... so you do not tell the truth." Ceriss spoke darkly. "I do not suffer liars in my summer home." Leal put his hand on the hilt of his sword. How could she be so confident? He was not aware that he would be right in the center of this right from the beginning. He knew his hand had to be visibly shaking. A smirk from two of the males who put their hands on their own long, heavy swords confirmed that.

"We do not lie, we make that prediction." The older female stated.

"I have no intention of retiring my position." Ceriss stated flatly.

"Are you daft?" the other female, a younger one with black fur and red-trimmed armor barked. "We are here to kill you, whore!" Leal felt his fear ebb, replaced by genuine rage. That was the queen they spoke of, even if not who they spoke to. Ceriss, however, remained icy calm. It was eerie to the guard, watching her. These eight people were here for the sole purpose of murdering the person she was pretending to be. Every one of them sought her demise, and left her heavily outnumbered.

"Who are my killers?" the priestess asked, folding her arms behind her.

"Watch her hands, if she starts visibly drawing essence..." One of the two males drew his sword. The others followed suit, preparing to attack when given the order by their leader. The older female stood still, seeming perturbed, but not afraid.

"We are those who wish to see our species survive to fight another day. Even if under the same conditions as the Asuna, at least we will live, and we might live to see better days. But we won't if you take after your mother and provoke the dark one as you do. The royal house will never submit, so this is the answer."

“Your *name*, assassin. Tell me your *name*.” The tone of the queen was more irritated than worried. “I don’t care about your cause; it is folly and shall be short-lived.”

“I am Russe. I will not be the new queen, if that’s what you ask. I am just here to make sure you do not remain.” After her introduction, she made a short grunting noise, and went kind of stiff. She then stumbled forward toward the fountain and planted her hands against the edge of it, as if she were going to vomit into it. Leal stepped to the side, not drawing his sword as he watched, dumbfounded. The look on her face was absolute terror. She looked like she was trying to keep herself from falling into the water.

“Russe!” cried the other female. “Russe, what are you doing?”

“Hey, are you okay?” called one of the males, lifting his sword to the ready. Inexplicably, Russe plunged her head into the cold fountain water. She went to her knees, and began kicking her feet, as if struggling to get out. Ceriss stepped back as two of the attackers ran to try to pull Russe out. The priestess had not stepped back out of fear, Leal realized, but to keep from getting water splashed on her, more concerned with remaining tidy as this horrible thing happened.

“It’s the queen! She’s attacked her somehow! Kill her!” called the second female, but her expression switched from anger to fear. Leal drew his sword, ready as he could be for the attack, and glanced at the queen. She was no longer Nita. Ceriss was in her place.

“It’s a trap!” screamed one of the males. Ceriss grabbed the iron garden lamp she had stepped closer to and its appearance changed. The light faded and vanished as it metamorphosed into something very different. The lady priestess held a scythe with a four foot crescent blade with three round white jewels at the end of a six foot iron pole, the weapon gleaming silver in the moonlight. Leal held his sword at the ready, but faltered a little. He was seeing something that no one had seen in hundreds of years. He was seeing a Letai priestess in battle, something even legends glossed over. Her darkness spilled out from her, hiding her outline a bit, making her seem like a shadowy mass, a flickering darkness, her eyes glinting as they reflected light. They were left uncovered most likely because even she could not see through that spell.

“What the hell is it!?” cried one of the other guards.

“Russe! Russe!” Leal gripped his sword and snapped his focus back at the other two, still struggling with the older lady. Her feet slid outward finally, shaking a bit fully extended, and then still. Ceriss had grabbed her invisibly somehow with the essence and drowned her right in front of all of her allies. Leal knew battle was never pretty, but that seemed almost unnecessarily brutal. There was absolutely no defense from something like that.

“Attack, damn it!” cried the younger female, seeing Russe die. Leal gritted his teeth and turned, digging in his heels. They were surrounded on all sides. The shadow shrank a bit, and then bolted forward faster than anything Leal had ever seen could move, a gleaming white crescent glinting under the moonlight as two soft impacts were heard. The first two who drew their swords moments before now lay in four parts on the cobblestone path, making Leal’s stomach lurch. He turned away both to face attackers that were still alive, and not to have to look at the remains Ceriss had so quickly fashioned out of those fighters’ misguided intentions.

“Run!” cried one of the other fighters.

“Stand your ground, or we are compromised!” shouted the younger female. She rushed toward Leal, apparently not having the nerve to attack that black mass. Leal held his sword up, but she stumbled and fell at his feet, a very large knife protruding from her back. The panicked fighters turned, their numbers already halved. Lunaris had thrown the dagger from some distance and was approaching fast, his two handed sword held high for its first crushing blow against the assassins. Leal glanced just in time to catch an attacker lunging toward him, perhaps having seen that he was looking at Lunaris and not at the fight. He cursed himself for not being more professional in combat, and parried the thrust with a loud clink of steel, swung his sword to the side, down, then up in a flipping motion to end just at the rib-cage of his attacker. Leal had never had to actually kill before, so he was surprised at how hard the jolt was to his arm when the grey-furred, shaggy young lupine impaled himself on it. He was just as surprised to find the blade required a very significant tug to pull out. Ceriss’ shadow trimmed a bit, making her look more the way she did when she met Leal, and she moved toward the remaining three who realized that in the middle of the courtyard, now they were the ones who were outnumbered and essentially surrounded. All three went for Leal, who braced his foot behind him a little. He knew very well he had given the appearance of weakness in his response to this fight, and that was why the enemies came to him. He vowed not to let that happen again as he prepared for the fray.

They were unaware perhaps that he had trained heavily in his youth, and chose to be a guard at a young age and not just when the need for money arose. He was a career fighter, and deflected the first attack with ease, spinning on his left foot and cleaving the neck of that attacker, before dodging the next incoming stroke. He cast a hard blow at the one who had just missed it, but that wolf, perhaps with more experience than Leal had, was able to hop back, and jump back in with a thrust, putting a couple inches of steel into Leal’s side, making him wince with agony, but not enough to make him falter. He staggered back slightly, feeling the sensation of heat well around the wound, blood pouring from it. He didn’t have time to look to see how bad it was. He readied himself a little more weakly for the next attack, but it didn’t come. A massive sword protruded from

his attacker's chest, then drew back briskly, Lunariss pulling the blade out of him. The captain was perhaps not the best thing to ignore on the battlefield. The last potential assassin threw down his weapon and went prone, crying out.

"Stop! Stop, they made me!" Leal watched him wail in fear as Ceriss approached him. He clutched his side a bit, feeling how wet it was with blood. It was not immediately too bad. Lunariss forced his hand to move, and checked on him. The chainmail that the wolf guard wore protected him from what might have been a fatal thrust, but his flesh had been opened all the same. The captain murmured faintly,

"It looks like it's not wide enough to indicate that the sword made it all the way in. Organs should be alright. We will get you patched up later." Leal was hardly paying attention to his wound, however.

"You chose this path." Ceriss' tone was indifferent. She was not angry. "The Spirits of Silverlight have brought this darkness upon all of them, tarnishing what had been their high standing in this nation for what? Idealism and greed? Do you think the dark one would have treated you better? You see how I treat traitors to the crown, liars and assassins. *This* is how the Uruk, controlled by the dark one, treat *children*. That is what you wanted for this world. Then you show even greater greed to believe you can be spared."

"If you kill me, you will never find out who is behind all of this! The Spirits of Silverlight didn't just decide to do this; we were taken over by a bigger group. Kill me and their identity will never come to light!" He sat up, looking confident.

"You would betray this group to me?" Ceriss asked. Leal gritted his teeth, taking an offered handkerchief from his captain and pushing it to his wound to stop the bleeding. He knew immediately where she was going with that question.

"Yes! They deserve to be punished for this foolish act, do they not?" The sable-furred wolf stood up shakily, his sword still on the ground. Suddenly, he lurched upward, hanging three feet off the ground. Ceriss seemed not to have to even move a muscle to do it. He struggled, kicking and flailing, holding his throat, which apparently was where she was holding him as he gasped and gagged.

"You have proven yourself a traitor twice now in ten minutes. I am not so foolish as trust you a third time.

"You will never know!" he coughed.

"I will know." Ceriss growled, looking at him angrily.

"I will take the secret with me. Once I'm dead, *ulk!* Once I'm dead it's gone for good." Leal felt kind of bad for the fighter, but he was there to kill the Queen, so he certainly did not feel bad enough to try to tell Ceriss to stop. What was coming would have been his fate even if Nita herself had to decide. It was the law. Still, murder was a hard thing to stomach, justified or not.

"That is your choice." Lunaris stated coldly, interjecting on behalf of the law. Leal looked to him. A fight against eight assassins, and he was not even breathing hard. Leal realized why Lunaris had been so confident. If he knew even half of this priestess' skill, he knew they were never in any real danger. Leal's hesitation and inexperience had been the only reason why he was even slightly hurt. It made a lot more sense why the dark one wanted the Letai wiped out. An army of these priestesses would have been unstoppable, but it was a blow to his senses that the Letai were wiped out anyway. That was a real testament to the dark one's power.

"It's *your* choice, you mean. This won't be the only attempt on the queen. You can stop it, but you need me." croaked the struggling wolf.

"No, it's *my* choice." Ceriss stated flatly, and then the suspended lupine lurched hard, as if thrown, and sailed, flailing, right over the wall that separated the courtyard from the seaside cliff beyond. A long drop awaited him, and an impact was never even heard as the sound of the surf drowned out his unpleasant encounter with the shattered boulders below. Leal stood there quietly a moment, not wanting to look around at the other results of that fight. The wound, though shallow, was feeling more and more painful as he stood there. Still, the wound was valuable to a guard. Being harmed as one stands for the Queen was a gleaming honor to the royal guard. It was the sort of thing that earned one a seat at the royal table. Lunaris spoke up.

"You know... We could have at least tried to get some information out of him. He seemed willing enough, even if it would not have changed his sentence for treason." He looked over the wall, perhaps seeing the unpleasantness on the rocks below. It did not seem to faze the more veteran warrior.

"There was little to guarantee he would give us real information." Ceriss murmured. "He would have known that his fate would be unchanged. He was likely instructed to feed us false information if captured, and if we are the ones to kill him, he's not happy with us anyway and he would surely like to inconvenience us. There is a better way to get that information."

"Neit is gone, so she either followed someone as asked, or she ran when she saw what you were." Lunaris said quietly. "She's our only chance for more info now."

“Not quite.” Ceriss stated, getting both wolves’ attention. She held out her hand, and a small bluish sphere lit up, slowly rising skyward from behind the wall. It jolted suddenly from its upward floating, and moved to the courtyard. It flickered a bit, and Leal heard a long, plaintive, horrified scream that sounded like it was close, but still somehow far away, like it was in dense forest, hard to get a fix on, and beyond all help.

“A spirit? For the one who just...” The grey lupine wrapped his arms around himself, recoiling. By all that was righteous and lawful... Ceriss could attack people who were already dead!

“There is no escape, traitor. No rejoining the essence for you. This could be your fate... for centuries if need be. Not having a body anymore doesn’t mean I cannot make you remember pain.” Leal backpedaled a bit fearfully. Ceriss was bordering on being a monster before him. He could hardly believe that this was what the Letai were really capable of. He could not fathom she was the same one who had such a short time ago shown him such incredible pleasure. Now, she showed herself capable of torture beyond anything his darkest thoughts were capable of.

“I don’t know where they are!” the spirit cried. He then wailed in agony again.

“I have to exert force on your body to make you feel pain, but with you in this state, I can make you feel pleasure or pain with my own memories, and I promise you, I know more about pain than you remember, so this can be much worse than anything you have ever experienced. Tell me what you *do* know.”

“Well, this is actually pretty horrifying.” Lunaris stated under his breath. “Gonna have to maybe have her assist us sparingly. I would not wish this on any but this sort of traitor.” Leal nodded, ignoring his wound again. He was not suffering like *that* at least. The voice of the spirit seemed tinny, echoless, as if coming from inside instead of out as it called out again.

“They called the shots for the Spirits of Silverlight before Azia took over with a more moderate stance. They were not happy when she allied herself with the crown. I don’t really know *who* they are, but they are an old group, and I do know they are the ones who had the former queen assassinated. They want to give the empire to Mannus, even if it enslaves us like the Asuna. It’s as we said, it’s our only hope against the dark one. The attack is bigger than just overthrowing the crown here in town. We know the people would likely revolt. They have to be able to keep order. They are bringing the Uruk over the ocean to overtake the city. They will be here in two days, hundreds of them. There is nothing you can do. Tell people not to fight, and the Uruk won’t harm them – NggyyaaaaaaaaAAAAA!” He screamed again and that light shifted from blue to red. Ceriss snarled.

“Fool! The Uruk can’t function here! They need a special crystal. There would have to be one right here on the island!” There was a pitiful, weak squeak from the glowing orb.

“There is! Oh there is! I saw them bring it ashore. I don’t know where they took it, but they said it was for the final solution.” Leal’s heart sank. He didn’t understand all the talk about the crystals, but he knew well what would happen if the Uruk got into Diera. Not fighting back would not mean no one got hurt. It would be the worst slaughter the people of Amani had ever known. Ceriss snarled out furiously, and the light went darker red, the color of blood as a whisker-crimping scream echoed through the night. It went on for several minutes, before the priestess stopped. She was blistering with rage, her shadow extending out in a horrifying tangle of bramble-like mass, moving and coiling and shrinking and growing.

“Your treachery may well have caused the death of everyone in Diera, do you understand that?! This city won’t be held by the Uruk, the people would fight to the last child, and you know that! Is that what you wanted?!” Leal felt less and less sorry for the spirit. He was a monster, even if he did not believe it.

“I had no choice! They would kill us!” cried the ghost.

“I killed you!” Ceriss barked. “Is this so bad that you would have innocent children slaughtered by unfeeling Uruk for weeks until this city was a crumbled burned out tragedy of the Amanian people? Is you being dead worth every moment of their suffering? Your selfishness would bring an end to all things!”

“You only assume that! They assured us that only those who fight back will be killed!” The ghost shifted back to blue, safe from the priestess’ abuse as she tried to make him understand what he’d done.

“When has that *ever* been the case, worm?” Lunaris finally shouted. “Never! That means that everyone here, upon seeing the Uruk attacking, *will* fight back because we have absolutely no reason to believe that anyone would be spared. This city will be destroyed in two days’ time because of your selfishness!” The light became darker blue.

“I’m sorry!” the spirit sobbed.

“You are not sorry that you caused it. You are sorry that we know that you caused it. You are sorry that it makes you suffer. That is not enough.” Ceriss growled.

“I told you what I know! You still intend to torture me?!” the light wailed.

"No." Ceriss stated. "You do not deserve to know any kind of continued existence." There was a short pause.

"Then, you would allow me to return to the essence?" he asked dolefully.

"No." Ceriss stated icily. "You will not. Your essence is tainted with the worst kind of darkness, an inability to feel for anyone but yourself. The level of darkness that stains your memories and your spirit will poison the essence more than it already is, and give power to the dark one. I cannot allow that to happen."

"What can you do? Just hold me here forever?" he asked. "Even you will eventually die, whatever you are." His words were cold and unfeeling. That mockery of sobbing was gone. Leal was unsure how Ceriss was able to so easily see through it.

"If you knew what I was, you would not have had the nerve to answer that." Ceriss' form snapped to a more defined and recognizable appearance, though still dark. Her eyes, however, glowed a deep violet. "Naros forarthu'tir istastah winos'renstar tirhurarthunar bineldacuruuthumiristanargil narostirhuristanargil." As she said those words, three rings of light formed, spinning around the light. It brightened suddenly, bright white, and screamed loudly.

"What is this?! No! No! What is this darkness! Please, I can change!" The echoless words were lighter than before, despite obviously being screamed. The rings formed strange symbols and continued spinning, and then broke, as if thrown apart by their spinning, and the bright white light shattered, smaller lights thrown off, scattered, then fading away. Ceriss' fur flickered from black, to her true white color a few times, making it obvious that took a lot of power. She regained control a moment later, and crossed her arms.

"I apologize for that unpleasantness. I assure you it was warranted." She stated.

"What the hell did you do to him?" Lunar is asked loudly.

"I destroyed him." The priestess stated calmly.

"You already killed him." Leal stated in slight confusion. "How else could you destroy him?" His heart sank the moment he asked the question as he realized what she meant. She spoke.

"His energy has been separated from the lifestream. His memories, his energy, his story, and all that he ever meant or wanted or hoped or dreamed... All of that is completely erased from the universe. If our world lives to see happier days, no part of him will ever know them." Her words rang in his ears. This

priestess had the power to kill him without touching. She had the power to trap his spirit after he was dead, and continue to harm him, make him suffer beyond the limits of his body. She had the ability to obliterate his very essence and deny his being a part of the flow of time itself. Whoever that assassin was, he suffered death in a way that almost no one else would. Leal felt himself for the first time actually genuinely horrified of someone. Ceriss had this power, and she still fell to the Shadowfall. That was what the Queen was facing, and she did so every day with a smile, there to support her subjects, and give them strength. As he feared Ceriss, he loved his Queen more and more.

"How are you feeling, Leal?" The words from the Priestess seemed a complete juxtaposition of what he just witnessed. She cared for him. She was the same one who he spent intimate time with again. Was that really what war was like? Did battle have the ability to change a person so much?

"I am feeling fine. It's not a bad wound. I can wait to get to the castle infirmary and get patched up I think. It hurts, but injuries do." He tried to put on a strong front. After what he witnessed from Ceriss, he felt it would be silly to whine about his little stab to the side. After all, his spirit wasn't just shattered after being tortured after having his body splattered on jagged rocks after being choked half to death by unseen hands after being forced to watch his friends and colleagues hopelessly slaughtered for their endeavors. No, Leal was feeling much better than all that.

"You do know assassins typically use poison on their blades, right?" the priestess asked. Leal felt a spike of panic through him. Suddenly, everything hurt, and he felt like he was burning, and he felt sick to his stomach, and he knew he was dying.

"He'd be dead already." Lunariss said confidently. "Don't mess with his head, this has been rough on the lad." Leal felt sudden love for his captain for taking up for him, but was still visibly shaken.

"Are you sure? I don't feel good." The grey furred guard stated.

"Relax, Lunariss is right, you would be dead already if you had been poisoned in the fight." Ceriss stated calmly.

"Don't *do* that!" Leal gasped, clutching his chest, heart still hammering in fear. "That's not funny! So... why did they not poison their weapons? I know that's how assassins usually do, right?" he asked.

"They did, but fortunately for you, they had their blades out plenty long enough for me to push the poison down to the hilt with my essence. They would have had to run you through to poison you, Leal. That's why I drowned the first one, to get everyone close enough to the water for me to get it on their

weapons.” Leal wavered. She thought that far in advance? Not only was she powerful, but she was a tactician as formidable as the general herself. He suddenly felt sheepish near her. The wolf had been so candid and careless with this powerful and respectable individual.

“S... So what do we do now?” asked the guard, his fingers tingling as the sudden jolt of adrenalin wore off slowly.

“We get you patched up, return to the castle, rest, and then we try to find that crystal before the Uruk get here.” Lunariss stated.

“The Uruk! No, I almost forgot! We have to evacuate Diera!” Leal felt that adrenalin pumping right back into his system.

“To where?” his captain grunted. “We do not have enough boats to get everyone off this island in six weeks, let alone two days. We have to find and destroy the crystal.” Ceriss held up a hand.

“We cannot destroy it.” She began heading for the manor. Leal and Lunariss followed.

“Isn’t that what Alps and the others intend to do? Do you mean to say they can’t be destroyed, or just that you don’t have the ability to?” he asked.

“If the Avatar realizes that we know what the crystals are, he will dramatically increase the defenses around the crystals close to him. He does not consider them yet to be a weakness. He does not take them seriously. Even at the risk of Diera falling, we cannot risk Alps and Nita failing in their mission.”

“Then what do we do?!” exclaimed the guard. Ceriss resumed being calm.

“We take it off the island. The dark one can feel if a crystal is broken, I am sure, but he would not be able to tell that it’s been taken miles west over the ocean and dropped into the dark depths where it would be useless to him.”

“How do we find it?” asked Leal.

“We don’t. You do.” The guard backed up a bit.

“Alright, how do I find it?” he asked.

“I will teach you to see it... to follow it, I have a very short time to do it, but it’s the only way.” Her tone was very authoritative, and he felt as if he were actually talking to a general, or to royalty. The Letai held a lot of power when

they existed in their full glory so long ago, and it showed. Lunar is did not challenge her, but he did speak up.

“I would be willing to learn and to search as well.” Leal thought the captain might be the better choice for such an important task anyway.

“Lunar is, you will need to prepare a boat, a crew, and get the rest of the town guard prepared in case we fail. We might not be able to save everyone, but we certainly will be prepared for what we are to face. They are not expecting us to know what’s going on, they expect the town to be in mourning, numb shock from the assassination of their queen, and unable to even look to see what’s coming. They are not prepared to deal with a fully aware, alert, and eager city defense, and they sure as fuck aren’t ready for me.” Her eyes glowed red briefly as a reminder to Leal that very unpleasant things were ahead for the Uruk. Would it be enough, though? Did Ceriss fear death with such a fight ahead? Leal followed her inside as he resolved to do as the priestess asked. He would not fail her. They had to find that crystal and move it. He never wanted to see the dark Letai priestess in battle again.

The fight for Alps and the others had gone well and that gave them a lot of energy to continue traveling with. The good mood that it placed them in was something that the former slave could actually feel. He wondered if his mother would be disappointed in her son if she thought he was able to draw essence from the others because of battle. That surely was not what the Letai were supposed to do, but Lira and Reika especially enjoyed it so much that he got as much passion and energy from the event as he felt he might a quick lusty encounter with one of them.

Luna did not seem to mind that the others were happy about it. Whale commented that he had always made the Uruk more durable, and that new management was sloppy about it. Reika took offense as the Asuna were the ones who had to make the things, but Lyat convinced her that it was not a slight against the Asuna, since Whale had made the original Uruk and he was not starving to death in a mine like those currently making the avatar’s war-golems. The travel took them along that river bed for a long distance before they opted to go into the forest just a bit to set up camp deep enough in the trees that their fire would not be easily visible from the likely more heavily travelled riverbed.

There was an eerie calm for having been fighting such a short time before, but Whale helped Luna set up camp close by Lira’s little selected spot among the leaf litter. Nita and Nidaja set up their very minimalist shelter in similar fashion, no sides but a nice silky canopy to keep things from dropping onto them. Alps assumed he would likely sleep under that, while others had squat lean-to style

shelters to enjoy. It was rustic, but very quick and easy. For the kind of travel they were doing, it was as good as one could hope for. Lyat and Reika intended to sleep under the stars. Once camp had been more or less set up in the silvery light of the moon, Nita asked Alps and Reika to gather firewood, which they were more than happy to do.

The drawback, Alps found, was that after what had happened between him and the Asuna in the tub on the boat a couple days before, he felt a little awkward alone with her and did not know exactly what to say. She was not as crazy as he originally thought, since Bone was actually conscious, or at least, linked to something that was, but he was sure that she was still at least a little emotionally troubled, and probably not the safest person to get close to. She might not understand the unusual dynamics of his relationship with Nita, and her willingness to share just with her closer friends. He might not be able to give Reika the direct love that she wanted, if that was in fact what she wanted. They silently collected choice bits of wood for a bit, padding back and forth to the camp, and into the darker trees, before he felt her take one of his hands. He gasped lightly as she turned him to look into his eyes, his muzzle tilted slightly downward to gaze at the slightly shorter hyena.

“Alps...” she said softly. The wolf held his breath. He was not sure what to tell her. Was she falling in love? Was he making things harder for his friends? He did not want to hurt any of them.

“Reika...” he whispered, not sure at all what she wanted. She leaned in and pushed her cheek to his chest. He slipped his arms around her to hold her. Would Nita be angry that he showed her affection? She would let him know if he was starting to cause her unhappiness, he was sure.

“Thank you.” The hyena girl whispered to him. He perked his tall ears a bit. She was thanking him? For what?

“For?” he asked sheepishly.

“You take Asuna with you on this trip. Is dangerous, yes, but Reika is joyful. Reika is happy to go with Alps.” The wolf swallowed at that, touched, but still worried about her emotionally.

“I hope that you and Lyat come out of this okay. It’s not going to be easy. Don’t worry your brother too much.” Alps was trying to be supportive, but not overly affectionate.

“Reika will be careful, yes.” Her tone was as non-insane as he had heard her. She seemed to relax that extreme nature when she was alone with him. Was this the real Reika? Was everything else a show? “Bone was right about you. Reika is glad she did not rip out wulf’s throat as she wanted before. Is glad

she is not killing you.” She then threw her arms around the white lupine and squeezed him close, before picking up a heavy piece of wood and bounding off with it. Alps sighed a bit, and leaned back against a sturdy tree. He supposed he would just be glad for that.

“You are very kind to her.” A female voice spoke from behind him. Alps turned suddenly to see Luna standing there. He blushed a little and nodded to her.

“She is a little odd, but Reika’s a good girl.” He offered meekly. The priestess smiled.

“I know. I worried at first, but spending time with her I found that to be the case. You have grown up to be everything I would have wanted you to be Aris. I wanted to tell you that.” Her feathery tone was like a glowing white caress of love to his heart, and he felt a jolt of joy spike through him, tears welling in his eyes.

“Mother...” he murmured in a hushed and reverent tone. Saying it only pulled him closer to tears. His mother was proud of him and happy for him. He had not considered how she really felt about what his life was like before because of how fast things were happening. There was so much to consider that was larger than himself that he had not spent much time “feeling” about some of the things that really only affected him. Luna pulled him close in an embrace. Alps put his arms around the robed priestess. He thought for a moment. Her bloodline was his. He belonged in this embrace. As dangerous as these days were, this was the life he was intended to have. Not long before, he had been a slave, fearful as he ran home to his mistress to face punishment, and now, he was living the life that perhaps had always been intended for him, and Luna was proud. He gritted his teeth and squeezed her tighter.

“What you do is hard, and I would never have wished you to do it, but I am glad that you have the strength. Know that the love you have given each of these people is why we are here now.” The white male leaned back and looked into his mother’s green and violet eyes. She continued to speak. “Nita gains strength from your love, and you made her life better. Nidaja, who loves her sister, also loves you with no less passion than Nita, and welcomes you as family. She will do for you everything she would do for the Queen. You belong with the two of them. The love you taught Nidaja caused her to forgive the Asuna, and fosters a deepening important friendship with Lyat. The love you show Reika brings her closer to friends she would never have allowed herself to have, and a happiness that Lyat has always wanted for his sister. Uri and Misha are bound closer than ever because of the hope you have given them for a future for this world. Ceriss and I have the same hope that your love has given us.” Alps positively glowed under the compliments, and then blushed, realizing that Luna

might very well be drawing essence from him. It was alright. She was being honest with him, he could tell. He then sighed a bit and murmured,

“Vhale does not seem to be very... happy to have me around. Do I frighten him?” Alps asked. Luna leaned back a little and stroked her son’s cheek. She thought about that a moment and then folded her ears back.

“You have pretty well already figured out why he’s frightened of you.” The priestess spoke in a secretive tone.

“Because I broke his Shadowfall?” he asked. “But he regretted putting me there. I would think he would be happy I got out.” Alps leaned back against a wide and sturdy slightly tilted tree.

“If that was all you did, that would surprise him but not frighten him, Aris.” Luna looked sadly into her son’s eyes. She seemed to regret there was some discomfort between the two.

“Then he is frightened?” Alps asked. It was a little stunning to find that out for certain. This was Mannus. He nearly single-handedly erased the Letai from history, misguided though he may have been.

“Yes, he was. Before you told us of your dream, I felt that it was overreaction. Alps, he is not overreacting. He alone, more than me or anyone else, knows what happened to you.” The priestess leaned in closer, making her son blush a bit as her bosom pressed to his chest. “You did not escape your Shadowfall the first time, I think you know that. You caused it to collapse. You are better off knowing nothing of where you went then, but Vhale knows. And I think he’s seen it. I think he knows what’s actually there.” There was a slight pause in her voice. “Vhale did not come out of that experience with his right mind. You seem to have avoided the damage he suffered, but it’s what caused him to do the terrible things he did. You were stuck in there as a child, and surely went through things he does not even want to imagine, and not only are you okay, but you escaped it. We may never know what happened in there, but you surviving that as a child is what makes Vhale afraid. When he looks at you, all he can see is the innocent child that his actions put into that terrible place. It’s a bit much for him. He is getting better as he sees what your life is like now. He sees that you are happy, and it eases the burden upon him.” Alps looked down for a bit, off to the side, still blushing at Luna’s closeness. It was impossible not to think, for that moment, about that rather shameful dream. He swallowed and then looked up at her again.

“Do you think Vhale will ever be able to be happy?” Luna’s face softened, and he felt he could see her eyes become wet. Had he said the wrong thing?

“Alps... those words are what make me realize that you have grown to be everything I would have ever hoped for.” His heart jolted a bit again. “That you would feel him deserving of it, after all that was done.”

“He made mistakes, but they were driven by something else. He’s not without blame, but I think he is worth saving.” Luna leaned in suddenly, gasping back a sob, and embraced her son tightly. He felt her quiver, and he just held her there. The essence that he could see around her appeared like ribbons, swaying like thick silk underwater, coiling around him and letting him feel her joy. He was finding that the Letai were very good about sharing their emotions with one another, and he tagged her with his own essence, letting her feel his joy in return. He was happy to get to hold his mother, and he was filled with contentment to know that she was proud of him. She shivered a bit again, perhaps in response to the wolf’s own emotions, and then slipped back a bit, holding his hands as she regarded him.

“Would you allow me to draw from you, Aris?” the priestess asked. The wolf flicked his ears a bit at that.

“Haven’t you already been drawing from me? I thought that’s what you were doing...” He was a little puzzled. Why ask permission now?

“I have been, yes, and your essence is very intense... very copious. I feel that for the trials we have ahead, we both need to be very deliberate in keeping our energy levels high. You have a nearly overwhelming amount as it is, but not much ability to do anything with it. Would you be willing to share it with me?” she asked.

“If you keep complimenting me the way you have been, I will probably cry.” Alps said sheepishly with a chuckle. Surely she was not suggesting what it sounded like.

“There is nothing to be shy about, Aris. This is fine...” Luna whispered, slipping her arms around her son. Alps’ eyes widened a bit, and he stiffened up a bit. Fine? He whispered softly,

“You do know that Amanian culture holds this... rather taboo.” The priestess’ lips were so near his own. His thoughts were awash with a mix of memories of the time he spent with her in the crystal, and the odd and heated dream he had of her. She remained pressed close.

“They hold an even stronger taboo for what you did to Reika.” Luna’s words were thick with accusation, but still gentle and soothing. It was true, however. One might be thought strange for what Luna intended, but sleeping with an Asuna was grounds for being marched out of town. He then shook his head a little.

“How did you even know about Reika?” He had not told anyone, fearing Nita might have misgivings. He would tell her, of course, but it was not the sort of thing he had time to bring up just yet.

“Aris, you have intense essence, you know that. I was with everyone else that it could have been at the time. Reika was the only one left.” Alps folded his ears back at that.

“I fear that Nita might have misgivings... concerning what you ask.” He lowered his head a slight bit, knowing that he was blushing enough to be visible even in the silvery moonlight.

“Said someone who routinely sleeps with two sisters together.” Alps’ blushing easily and impossibly doubled at his mother’s words. He wanted to say that it was different, but was it? Before he could answer, Luna spoke again, “I would stop if I knew you were genuinely displeased by the thought, Alps, but that’s not what I feel. You worry that your friends would disapprove. Nita already knows what I intend to do. And she knows why.” The former slave perked up.

“You asked her about this?” he was incredulous. What a thing to ask his mate! Luna was either terribly confident, or absolutely shameless. Luna put her hand around Alps’ muzzle to silence him, pointing his nose to hers, and speaking sternly for a change.

“Aris, we will be facing things more difficult than what we did today, and you know we will rely more and more on my abilities, both to defend Nita, and to heal those you care about. I want you to think carefully. Would you want to even *think* that your pride and your fretting about a taboo that’s only a taboo to those who are not out here risking their lives... was the reason one of your friends- one of these brave travelers here today... did not make it home?” The wolf leaned back against the tree again, looking into his beautiful mother’s eyes. She was as right as she could be about why it needed to be done, but...

“And no one else here can assist? Lyat would perhaps not have anything against it, and I know he’s okay with being with wolves.” Alps blushed a bit in memory.

“I know he’s okay with it too, I’ve been with him.” Luna’s reply made Alps dizzy for a moment. She really was very up-front with that kind of thing. Had she really been with the Asuna? Why would she need to?

“So, we know he is okay with it.” Alps stated.

“Aris, you are drawing incredible amounts of energy, and you cannot actually use that energy for anything. We do not have time for me to teach you

valuable essence techniques on this journey. But, I can draw upon some of that energy, and I can use it to protect us. I can use it to heal us. I can use it to make sure that this mission does not fail. Nita understands the value of this, she knew without me even having to explain it.” The white male lupine looked at his feet for a bit, and then sighed, nodding as he looked into Luna’s eyes. She smiled kindly. “That’s better. Come... a little further away from camp... There’s a nice little wall of holly...” She led Alps further from camp.

“Should I tell Nita where... I mean... I don’t want her to worry.” He felt a bit dizzier. This was happening so fast, and he was somewhat embarrassed by the quick throb in his loins that told him that the act that was to follow had more control of his body than his worries about the ethical ramifications of it. He stumbled along in the near darkness of the forest with Luna.

“She knows what I’m up to Alps, she won’t worry.” The white-furred lady wolf towed along her hesitant son, and he found himself far enough away from the camp that he could not even smell the kindling fire anymore. There was a small clearing that Luna had selected, and the half-ring of holly bushes at the center seemed to shield them nicely from anyone wandering closer from camp. It wasn’t likely anyone would come to look for him if Nita said that there was nothing amiss. Alps looked around the silver-bathed clearing, soft grass waving in the gentle breeze as Luna put her hands on his shoulders, paying more attention to him. He swallowed reflexively.

“It’s been a while.” He noted. Luna actually blushed just a slight, barely noticeable amount, and nodded. She slipped in closer to Alps, and pulled him to the ground slowly. He felt his heart hammering rapidly. He wondered if she could have just had Nita or Nidaja tend to him, and be able to draw the energy that way. Surely she would have considered that. Maybe she had to be the one in contact with him for it to work right. He didn’t know much about the drawing of energy, but his mind went back to the roots that she used to ruin that Uruk. He thought of how she held up Vhale with a powerful invisible force. The effect of her power was great. If he was needed for that level of protection, he would not allow himself to feel badly about what was to come. Alps leaned in against her as she got onto her knees before him, and pushed her onto her back, kissing her. Luna slipped her arms around her son, and drew back from the kiss, touching her nose to his ear as she whispered.

“You know, you don’t have to kiss me for this... Unless it’s absolutely necessary to your pleasure.” Alps’ ears, already scarlet, burned like summer roof tiles. He lifted up a little, shamefully pinning his mother.

“Uh... I am...” He was not sure what to say. Her face lit up in a warm and beautiful giggle and she embraced the white wolf closer.

“Stop worrying, Aris. I love you. We all do. What else should matter now?” The white lupine male sighed, and lowered his head again, nuzzling and kissing along Luna’s cheek and neck, his body responding with the familiar rush of sensation to his loins as he watched Luna undo the clasp of her robes, drawing them open for him. They made a rather nice ‘picnic blanket’ for them to enjoy themselves on under the bright light of the moon. She put herself to the task of undoing his armor, an act that seemed to come easily enough for her. She worked at removing his blazer and finally tucked her hands down, getting a gasp from him as she undid his trousers. He tucked his nose downward, kissing the bare bosom that sustained him in his distant infancy. He chased that sense of taboo away. Luna was right, he had broken worse with Reika with less guilt. He did genuinely love Luna, and this act could very well save Nita’s life. He took one of those firm pink nubs between his lips and kissed and suckled in a way he had not done since learning of her identity. Alps’ tail began to sway from side to side as he found that he did not care in that moment as much as he feared he would.

And in seconds, the tension melted away and pure lust overwhelmed him. Luna pushed his trousers down with her heels, pulling her son closer as he pinned her tighter to the ground semi-surrounded by holly shrubs. Bare bodies gripped and pulled and writhed in a clearing under the moon, and little entered their minds but the act that they had resolved to commit. Alps’ mind barely offered up more than the memories of the time they spent in the crystal, and the passion and love this lady wolf was capable of. She had been so alone for so long and needed his touch so much back then. He felt suddenly vile for even coming close to regretting those encounters. She needed that. She wanted to be held and it allowed him the power to free her.

There was a hot gasp and shuddering release of air from the lady wolf beneath him, and the older female buckled a little, hooking her heels on Alps’ rump as his thighs drew up tight to hers, his teeth gritted in pleasure as she spread so tightly around him. Forgotten were his worries from before as he jolted her body a little in that heavy hilt, then he drew back, and thumped his thighs to hers again.

“Spare me your release, Aris...” huffed Luna, a very miniscule pang of guilt rippling through Alps at hearing her say his real name. “Tell me and hold back...” Her actions and level of need did not seem to suggest timing was an issue, but Alps felt perhaps there was a specific plan she had concerning that final moment of pleasure that required she have control of it, so he nodded in agreement. He would enjoy himself up to that point without restraint though. His pleasure was what she needed, and he would provide gladly.

Luna gave an exasperated squeak as she rocked her own thighs back and forth a little to push Alps faster along. Her strong young son reciprocated, the

soft chuff of leaf litter under Luna's spread out cloak signifying the force of their union. Luna clutched Alps close and bounced a bit beneath him.

"Good boy, Aris... Faster... Faster..." She let her feet relax off of his rump, which made her sex actually tighten since she held her legs up off the ground for him, parted wide. She received his attentions very nicely. Alps was rarely given to a quick and easy tryst, but there were times with Nita and Nidaja where what they wanted was to just know he enjoyed them, and they asked only that he give himself to them as easily and quickly as time would allow. Sometimes this was because they were too tired for a more involved encounter, other times it was because there was not enough time before a meeting or other engagement required their attention. This was one time where Alps assumed correctly that time was something that they were not wasting, this was more about the intent.

Still, each successive stroke of his thighs, he cared less about the energy he was providing, and became more keenly aware of the energy Luna was giving off. Was he drawing upon her? Would that hurt the amount of energy she could draw? He could not help it. He saw from the outline of the holly that his wings were glowing brighter. He was definitely drawing. He was also drawing close, which slowed him a little. Luna whimpered a bit.

"Oh not yet, please, I just..." She perhaps felt that Alps would hold back a bit longer. He chuckled at the way she writhed. This was again Luna the High Priestess of the Letai, deserving of the pleasure this subjugated slave wolf could give. He slipped down her body, the lady lupine arching hard as his mouth sealed over her puffy parted petals. His tongue swirled and darted over tangy flesh. It pumped hard in and out, fluttering at that well-studied point as she sang beautifully with pleasure. For this being about his pleasure, she certainly did not refuse her own. Perhaps her arousal and need had been unintended? That actually stoked the wolf's ego a little.

A hard shudder, and Luna's lilting cry of joy made her son's wings actually pulsate with energy, glowing brightly. She held his ears, shaking softly as his tongue hammered her clit feverishly. She finally had to push him away, before he pulled himself up her body roughly, making her squeak in alarm as he drove himself deep inside that quivering channel. He thought that the break to pleasure her with his mouth would have been enough to drive him back from trigger point, but he gave her only a few shaking strokes before he drew out, panting.

"I'm gonna cum..." he held himself up, looking into her beautiful eyes, that white-furred lady lupine spread out on her robe on the grass, her hair long, spilling outward, her bare form a vision of perfection in the moonlight. He did love her, as a mother, and just as much in this way. What was so taboo? She scooted down suddenly, her body pushed between his thighs until he was

straddling her chest. His pink spire vanished into her muzzle and he grunted in loud pleasure.

Alps did not have to move an inch. Luna moved her tongue in such a way that it was more than enough, swirling and grinding rapidly at the point just under his glans. He embraced his chest as he sucked in a deep breath, and then let it out in a shaking, surrendering moan. His thick seed flooded his mother's suckling muzzle as her tongue continued to flick him in a way that made him almost hurt from the force of his release. His eyes were pinched shut in the shock of his pleasure, but when they opened, he saw something he was not expecting. In a near ring around and above him were broad ribbons of light. They waved and swirled like bands of silk under water, lifted and coiled by a current. They drew downward in an elegant and beautiful spiral, to his mother, at her lower back as if tied above her tail. Alps grunted in shocks of pleasure. Each little shock of heaven through his body made a little pulse of light reflected on the ribbons. Alps wavered in bliss as he watched them wave and coil around him, closer and closer, as if they were tentatively wanting to touch him.

Finally, the two ends of those ribbons daintily touched his wingtips. The ribbons turned bright gold, and Luna groaned loudly, almost agonizingly in pleasure, arching hard under her son. Alps actually wore an expression of worry a moment from the volume and intensity of her groan. Those bands of light glowed brightly, and he felt both heat and wind from the contact. Was this how drawing was always done, or was it different because of how much essence Alps had? Would this get rid of those wings? The ribbons suddenly flicked outward hard, as if blown off of his wings, and Luna just went limp, heaving and gasping beneath him. The lupine male looked over one of his shoulders, finding a glowing wing still stubbornly there. He panted softly himself, recovering slowly from his release, and looked to Luna.

She was conscious, but seemed very happily out of it. She writhed almost pitifully between his thighs. Alps blushed as he saw that, in her loud moan, she had expelled a copious amount of his seed over her bosom, the pearly seed spilling down both sides. He grinned to her.

"Was that okay?" he asked warily, not sure if he did anything incorrectly to negatively affect the drawing, even if she did not seem to mind the experience at all.

"There was... a lot more... energy there... than I thought. I misjudged... how much you have been drawing." She puffed. She pulled a silken kerchief from her spread out robes and began tending to the spill upon her heavy breasts. "You did well. I have a nice reserve of that... very wonderful energy. When I teach you more, you will appreciate what all of what you just saw meant. For now, just know that you are a very good boy." She smiled.

“Those ribbons... are those essence manifestations? Like my wings?” he asked. They actually seemed to be fading away, so he assumed those ethereal things were different. Luna nodded to him however.

“Yes, Aris. Exactly the same.” She used the ribbon seemingly intentionally to stroke her son’s cheek, making him blush a little at the sudden sensation of pure motherly love that swept over him. Her genuine maternal feelings for him had not wavered or changed, even after all they had just done. It was a pure, untainted tenderness that made him feel vulnerable and innocent.

“Why are they fading away, while my wings stay?” he asked.

“Essence manifestations occur when you draw more than your body can hold. It’s an overflow. It wears off because you can’t hold onto more than a specific amount of essence.” She teased Alps’ wings with the ribbons again, and jerked softly, as if smacked with bliss at each connection. Essence to essence, there was apparently a transfer of some kind that Alps didn’t understand, but it made those ribbons glow a little brighter for a time, before they started to fade out. “Everyone’s manifestation is a little different, but most cannot store so much as to cause an overflow, Aris. You however, are gathering and somehow holding more essence than your body naturally holds on its own. It’s not unknown, but it’s very poorly understood.”

“Can it hurt me?” Alps asked, not sure what was meant by holding more than his body could hold.

“In the past, nothing indicated it was harmful, but you bear the trait of those in the past who had that ability.” Luna murmured.

“What is that?” her son asked.

“You seem barely able to use the essence that you draw. You can carry unbelievable amounts, and it does affect those around you in a positive fashion, as positive essence will, but you have trouble expending that energy.” Alps remembered what he was told before. The attraction others sometimes inexplicably felt toward him was caused by how they reacted to the positive essence that was boiling off of him.

“Would that have made me so different if we were still among the priestesses and temples of the past?” he asked.

“Aris, this trait would have given you the choice of any temple you could have ever wished to serve. It’s a very attractive property. And it has a great use in our current day as well. It’s often hard for a priestess to regain lost energy. It’s very easy with you.” Alps laughed a bit, and then turned suddenly as he heard a soft sound of someone moving away from them.

Lira stood there, looking dumbfounded. Alps held his hands out.

"It's essence drawing." He explained immediately. Lira held her hands up.

"I'm aware of what it is, I studied the Letai... just... it doesn't involve me. It's fine..." Her ears were as bright scarlet as Alps could imagine an Emerald Amanian having. She backed up a bit more and then turned.

"Hey, it's not-" There was no pause as she stalked off briskly.

"Aris, it's alright, it will be explained better to her later. She is in a lot deeper than she intended to be, so there is a lot she needs to absorb." The priestess sat up as Alps pulled his trousers back on and carefully put his blazer on as well, looking over at Luna as she rather casually dressed.

"I am glad that I could... help everyone. That my strength is still important." Alps told his mother.

"You are a help just in being here... And make no mistake Aris..." Luna leaned in close. "That was not just about drawing. A Letai Priestess is allowed such contact as we have had, as we train our progeny in the ways of drawing and pleasure. While it may be a taboo now, it was not back then, as our numbers dwindled in those last days. Neither will I hesitate nor do I regret. I enjoyed that. I shall every time." With that, she padded back toward camp, leaving a very embarrassed white lupine in the clearing, his wings casting harder shadows than the light of the moon.

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 9

Nita and Alps sat shoulder to shoulder, watching the flickering campfire. The others had not awakened yet, but Alps found his short sleep oddly restful. He wondered if it had to do with the act of transferring his energy to his mother before he slept. He verified with Nita that she was fine with that which was required of him because of his abilities, and she slept pushed tight up against him enjoying the warmth of those wings against her chest. She said that she slept on the ground with him better than any time alone in her soft bed in the castle.

Luna was the next to join him, and Alps was happy to find that he did not feel odd the following day. It was still strange to him, but he did not regret his actions. He leaned in against Nita, who sighed happily. The priestess looked back and forth between them and gave a very motherly grin. Alps warmed a bit at it. Luna spoke soothingly.

"You two are sweet together. It makes me proud to see you there." Nita blushed a bit at that even more than Alps did. "You intend to marry... Have you given much thought to when?" The queen raised a brow at that. Alps looked over to her curiously, then back to his mother. It was an unusual thing to ask about so suddenly.

"I had figured it might be after we return." She stated. Luna rubbed her chin a bit thoughtfully at that. She did not seem content with that. The former slave found that to be silly. His mother seemed so happy when he first told her that he would be Nita's lover for the rest of his life.

"Is something the matter?" Alps asked. The queen held his hand gently, getting his attention.

"She worries that if we wait, we might never be married." Nita said.

"I trust you at your word." Alps replied. Of course she would still bind herself to him when they returned; it was what they both wanted. He had no reason to think otherwise.

“My word is not what’s shaky, Alps.” The green-toned royal murmured with some anxiousness in her voice.

“This is a very dangerous journey. If you and Nita wish to be life bound to one another, dare you partake of the risks which lie ahead without those bonds in place?” Luna’s words were carefully chosen and very effective. Alps clearly and immediately understood her worry. He wanted very much to be bound for life to Nita, but if one or both should perish in this mission of great importance, what a painful mark on history it would be that their dream never came true.

“I have thought of this as well.” Nita stated. Her lover gritted his teeth. She had worried of this and not shared with him? Did she think he might feel differently? Luna spoke up again in her helpful, endearing tone.

“I can perform the ceremony, you know. I’m a Letai high priestess. No one short of your own mother held more right and power to perform that ceremony for you, Nita.” The queen visibly fluffed, a smile spreading on her lips. Alps’ heartbeat quickened. Bound for life to the one he loved the most, no more waiting. How soon could it be?

“I would still want a more... official ceremony when we return... but Luna... I would not refuse such an offer. It’s important to me. To us. It’s very important.” She remarked. Alps heart raced. He agreed wholeheartedly with that. He would not hesitate.

“So... When may we be bound then?” Alps asked, almost feeling light headed. He did not expect this even moments ago when he got up. It was a sudden and wonderful revelation.

“My temple... or whatever remains of it... is in the direction we are going, if a little farther north than we intended. It’s worth the slight course diversion though.” Alps blinked a few times at that. The temple. Luna’s temple. He would be bound to Queen Nita Razelle in his first home. His real home. He had spent so little time thinking about what his life had been when he was smaller than his memories allowed.

“Not much must remain of it after 700 years...” Nita stated wistfully. “It would be an honor to be bound to him in the place he was from though. I will demand our course take us by there. Will you be able to find it?” she asked.

“It’s very obvious, and not likely to have changed much, ruined though it already was. We will be able to find it.” Alps’ mother stated happily. “It is decided then, I will bind the two of you. I wish you both to be aware the honor and happiness this is to me.” The white lady wolf sat back a little, her tail whiffing rapidly on the blanket she sat upon in front of the fire.

"It brings us all happiness, and that happiness will give us strength." Alps stated, nodding to Nita, who seemed nearly in tears. "I wish more of my family could have been able to see this day." He relaxed a little, leaning back with his hands slightly behind him, propping him a little.

"Your father in particular would surely not believe it." Luna chuckled. "He always felt life was better as simple as one could make it." Alps' expression fluctuated. His father? He sat up. He had been speaking of the family he had made of those in Diera. Misty, Uri, Misha... all of them would not get to be there, but Luna was right. There was an entire family that he had that no longer existed. He had not asked one time about who his father was, what he was like, anything, and felt suddenly alarmed with regret for that.

"I don't... know anything about my father..." he said with obviously pained realization.

"You never met him, Aris." The priestess half-whispered. "He passed away weeks before you were born." Nita frowned at that and pulled Alps close, but he felt little from it. It was sad, but it was not really sad for him. He didn't know.

"What was he like?" Alps asked curiously.

"He was..." Luna pondered that for a bit, looking thoughtful before sighing and smiling. "He was very unlucky, love." She chuckled a bit at that. Nita looked at Alps and then back to Luna in curiosity. She thankfully elaborated. "Before I became a High Priestess, I was the primary healer in the Temple of Life in the Great North Province where we are now headed. From the time I was a young student in the temple, to the day I was cast into the Shadowfall, war is what we knew. The Uruk back then made a mess of folks, so healers were in high demand, and very busy. As you can imagine, for a girl living as a healer in such times the best chance you would have to get to know someone... to get close to them, is if they needed to be healed. Often." Nita stifled a smile.

"He was accident prone, then?" the queen asked. Luna shook her head politely.

"No, not specifically, he just... had a way of finding himself in ridiculous circumstances where anyone's luck would be expected to break. Yes, his injuries were often unintended, but he was a border courier. He was primarily responsible for delivering messages and the like between the temples. Every time he came back to ours, he was damn near in pieces. But he was eternally happy and cheerful. He saw the war at its worst in some locations, but he held hope for things to get better and bolstered everyone's hearts when they saw him. Of course, after the fourth or fifth time I healed him, we had fallen in love. He stayed at the temple exceptionally long to recover from an injury to his back and

arm, and I decided on my 'mother's moon' to keep a little of him with me before he left again. We were bound under that moon, and consummated, and a few days later, he was gone. I would not get to see him again, but that was our world. It was almost expected." Nita rested her chin on her knees sadly as she heard that.

"What was his name? What did he look like?" Alps asked, still a little shocked that he had not thought to ask a thing about him so far. He hoped that telling him of his father was not painful for Luna.

"Dias. He had black and grey fur. He was actually rather small, like he was underfed as a kid. He was quick, and witty, and funny and kind. He had blue eyes. His tail was too long, and it got closed in doors sometimes." She nodded to Alps' almost overly full-bodied tail. "You ended up with a bit of that." Nita laughed a little. Alps fluttered his wings happily at the sound of his future mate's laughter.

"Do we know what happened to him?" Deep down inside his biggest fear was that Mannus was somehow directly responsible. That would only make it harder for the misguided Vhale to recover from his darkness, and the longer Alps thought about it, the more it felt like he would have to for this war to ever really be over.

"I am sure you would like knowing he perished in a battle, fighting valiantly against the Uruk and defending a town, or protecting his friends the way you would." Luna smiled as she said that. Alps nodded. It was easy to imagine he came from such stock. He would certainly do so for his friends. "Sadly, that's not the story I have to tell you." Nita grimaced at that.

"He did not die doing something bad did he?" she asked. Luna shook her head.

"No. But it was certainly not valiant... You see, one night, travelling with others, he met his end. They had stopped along a cliff overlooking a lake far to the north-east. The cliff made it so they had fewer directions to guard and they could sleep a bit longer. That allowed couriers to camp shorter periods and travel farther in a day." Alps nodded as he listened, his wings slowly twitching.

"Tactically sound, but I take it they were overwhelmed and pushed from the cliff?" Nidaja asked, making Nita jump a little. She did not realize that the general had come up behind her. Alps smiled to his first lover and patted the ground beside him. Nidaja took her seat, looking to Alps' mother.

"I wish it were even that valiant, but no. If that were the case, I could never have found what became of them." She explained.

"Then what happened?" Nidaja asked. Luna sighed softly and answered as soothingly as she could.

"Dias slept too close to the campfire, and accidentally rolled into it. It set his robes on fire, and he panicked." Alps winced at that, and Nidaja and Nita both cupped their muzzles. "He opted to chance the drop, and jumped to the lake below to put out the fire."

"... And the drop was too far and killed him?" Nita asked sadly. Luna shook her head no.

"... He drowned?" Nidaja asked. Luna rested her chin on her own knees, looking a bit disappointed herself.

"... The lake was frozen over." Luna finally muttered. That got a collective pained groan from all three.

"Oh, Luna, I am so sorry." Nita leaned over and hugged the priestess.

"It's alright. He would be happy to know the result of our union. The love he felt for me eventually ended up in the heart of the Queen of Amani. The gift he gave me eventually resulted in my freedom from the Shadowfall. He'd never have regretted that. It's worth the sorrow we held in our parting. And at least it was fast. He didn't suffer, I feel. His friends were unable to recover him though. He burned after he hit and melted the ice and fell through before they could get him and the lake claimed him. But I think he would have preferred I did not get to scatter his ash. He never wanted to see me mourn." Alps gritted his teeth. It was a complicated and awful way to go. He hoped his own exit would not be so elaborate.

"I think he would be happy that Alps got his ability to see the light on the horizon too. It's what has brought us here." Nidaja said softly. Luna smiled at that.

"Brighter days are ahead... even a few ahead of the darker ones that loom before us." The Priestess beamed as she said it.

"Something I should know?" Nidaja asked.

"I suspect that in about nine days we will arrive at the place where my temple used to stand." The priestess stood up and stretched a bit. "When we arrive there, Nita and Alps have decided... to allow me to perform the ceremony to bind them, and unite our families."

Nidaja squealed with delight, and the sorrow of family lost collapsed under the joy of a family gained.

Misty rested her chin on her fingertips which were bridged in front of her chest. She did not look happy. She sat upon the throne, the room darkened. It was the middle of the night, but she had not slept. She had waited for Lunaris and the others to return, and when they did, the news was far from good. Leal looked back and forth between Ceriss and Lunaris a moment in silence.

“Lunaris, as you know I am aware of the group you speak of. A few of our less official eyes have seen them... whispers of a group who would undermine us, and threaten the throne, but it's been some time since I have heard the name come up. I had started to think they were limited to the group that was found, and were only posturing, but I can see now this was not the case. You remember the ones I speak of, Captain?” Misty asked. The black-furred captain nodded at that slowly.

“Yes. Fen and Kun exposed them, before they were involved in the Kishu incident. I thought that had been the end of them. I guess it went a little deeper than that.” He seemed to be fuming about it.

“The extreme damage that those two did to ensure that was done with... and still they persist. We had to redraw the damn map, and it was not enough. I will send word to them to let them know. Our new little friend can deal with whoever they find on their side, but we need to busy ourselves with the defense of this city. Ceriss, prepare Leal as you said. Lunaris, make the preparations to have that crystal taken to sea, and find the thief. If she was found, I want her rescued. We cannot afford to lose any edge her knowledge might give.” Leal inhaled deeply at that.

“Ceriss might be faster at locating the crystal...” he offered. “I worry about leaving my post.”

“Do you think you could do a better job of defending me from attackers than Ceriss, Leal? If so, I can let you trade places.” The grey lupine guard widened his eyes, feeling suddenly rather foolish. Of course that was why he was the one who had to go. Ceriss needed to defend the throne. Misty would be far better protected by the pure and inescapable death that the priestess represented. He bowed his head.

“Understood. I will train with Ceriss.” He looked to the dark priestess, who smiled. He was still slightly frightened by her after what he'd seen.

“What will you do in the meantime?” Lunariss asked.

“Based on your report for what happened...” Misty said softly, “I shall be making arrangements to have the summer cottage cleaned.” Leal blanched a little, remembering all too well the look of the place. They had given the bodies to the ocean, but there was blood absolutely everywhere in that courtyard. Nita would not enjoy coming back to that if she needed a rest after whatever important journey she was on.

Ceriss motioned for Leal to follow, which he promptly did, and Misty was left to think. The guard hoped very much to get these troubled days behind him so he could spend his evenings in the soft and loving arms of the one who sat on the throne again. Ceriss was great, he would not say otherwise, but Misty did not drown people with unseen forces and torture and obliterate their spirits. Leal found her motherly caress to be a bit more genuinely appealing. Ceriss had merely needed the energy Leal released, and he had certainly not failed to consider that his life essence was used to kill those people.

“You seem a little more sullen than I am used to from you, Leal. Is this impending mission so frightening to you? You seemed stronger than that.” The priestess spoke as he walked close behind her. He looked down shamefully.

“There is much to be done. I worry that I...” He stalled a bit. He didn’t want to start thinking too much about what would happen if he didn’t succeed.

“Give up those thoughts, Leal.” Ceriss said, turning and holding his shoulders, looking into his eyes. She then lead him into a room that served as a study, though not the same that he had met Misty in the first time. The priestess closed and locked the door. She leaned back against a bookshelf. “But that’s not all that is troubling you.”

“Did all of them really have to die like that? It seemed so unnecessary.” Leal felt like an idiot saying it. He knew full well that even if they had just captured them, the queen would have ordered them executed. Ceriss put her hands back on Leal’s shoulders, making him look into her eyes again. She seemed to look deeper into his eyes than he remembered her doing before. She then looked down, sighing heavily.

“I was wrong. You have not suddenly become afraid of battle. You have become afraid of me.” Leal backpedaled a little. How could she tell that? He gritted his teeth; unable to lie and tell her that was not true. He was at least a little fearful. She had so much power and killing those people seemed almost trivial and unimportant to her. Life was dear to Leal. He widened his eyes a bit as the obsidian shadow drew inward, as if her snowy white fur absorbed it. Her expression was pained, much easier to read with the shadow gone.

"I'm sorry..." Leal said in a wavering tone. "I did not intend..." He realized that he had offended, or even hurt her.

"No, I should apologize. It's not for you to feel sorry here. Yes, I am scary when I fight, Leal. I have to be. The idea that helping the dark one would deliver salvation is not a new one. Ultimately, it took a great deal of betrayal by the Amani kingdom and the Asuna Tribes to cause our downfall." Leal's heart caught in his throat. The Amanians betrayed the Letai? He had heard no such thing.

"I cannot imagine the queen could do such a thing." He whispered. Ceriss shook her head, her long hair falling over her shoulders as she rubbed at her chin a bit.

"It was never the royal house. But people were afraid. They were afraid for their families, and the threat was there that everyone would die if the Letai were left alive. Most were willing to just tell us to leave their cities, and we could handle that. We understood. Some took it upon themselves to speed things along, and mobs formed to exterminate the Letai near the end." Leal gritted his teeth tighter at that. That was awful!

"I am fearful, yes, but I don't hate you, Ceriss." The guard pleaded softly. It wounded his heart seeing her sad, older-looking face as she told him this. "I fear the power you have... the ease with which you could do those things." She was obviously given a great deal of reason to be furious at the thought of people betraying the queen to save their own necks.

"We had to defend ourselves. We would never turn against the Amanians, Mannus was a Letai after all. It was our problem. Our fault, and we faced the problem as such. Sometimes you did not know if the ones you loved would be the ones you fought the next day. This was true war. Soon, Amanians who wanted to protect the Letai fought those who wanted them gone, and hundreds were dying without a single Uruk in the city. It was the darkest time, and I will *not* have this nation fall to the same." Leal felt sick as he watched tears streak the beautiful white-furred Ceriss' cheeks. "I will not see brother turned against brother like it was before, mother driving sword into son, I will *not* see that again. The Letai could have stopped that from happening before by fighting back against those who would do us harm ourselves, but we refused to harm the Amanians. It was too late before we changed our minds. Please understand that if that seemed easy for me, it is because it was too hard before, and I will not show that foolish restraint again. This group will learn fast that the Kingdom of Amani will not fall to betrayal. Not while a single Letai is still among them." Leal inhaled deeply, feeling wretched that he could feel Ceriss a monster for what he saw.

"No, Ceriss, I really am sorry for being... distressed by that. I have not seen the real face of war. I've seen a few crazed bandits brought back, and seen

bodies and the like, but that was my first time seeing what a real battle was like. I suppose I foolishly thought it would not be so..." He felt like he was digging himself in deeper. He sounded so naïve.

"... Not be so sad?" Ceriss asked. He faltered a bit, and looked up at her. He had not expected her to say sad, but that was truly it. The deaths of those people made him sad, not scared. "Leal, I don't want to kill. I opted not to go with the queen despite how much help I could be to her because I felt like I was done with the killing. I would help care for the castle until they returned. But it would seem that the world has a different plan for me. Don't hate yourself for being afraid, Leal. You are right to be afraid. What I am capable of is truly terrible, and you have not seen the worst I can do. I will do all I can to make sure you do not find out the worst a priestess *can* do. But know that what I do is tempered with resolve for a world that no longer needs me to be anything but a woman. I would love to have nothing to do but have a family, maybe do some herding, and prepare feasts for the village nearby and draw upon the joy of their merrymaking. That's what I want, not the terrible battles like you saw." Leal sat down by a table, and sighed softly.

"I am glad we got to talk about this." He spoke softly. "It really did weigh on my heart."

"I know. I cannot let you lose hope, Leal. What we must do might not be pleasant, but do not forget why we must do it." The guard nodded to the white-furred priestess. She paused a moment, and then slipped close to him, and then straddled his lap, tilting his head up. "Do you know why I color my fur black?" she asked.

"I assume it is to seem more imposing... To prevent conflict because people fear that darkness?" She smiled at him as he spoke. He offered more as she did not immediately reply. "I guess I always thought it was a way to display your power and make sure others knew not to push you. That's the effect it has on me at least. Immediate respect for your abilities." She leaned in and touched her lips to the bridge of his muzzle, making him warm a bit.

"Most feel that way, and I am okay with that, but I gained the ability for a more selfish and vain reason." She looked at him sadly a moment.

"Vanity should never be an issue for you. You are stunning to me. Very beautiful." The guard wanted the lady wolf to feel better. He wanted to see her happy again.

"I want you to think a moment, Leal... about what a massive amount of blood after a battle... the blood of your enemies... might look sprayed and splattered all over white fur." Leal recoiled a little as realization crashed over him.

“You gained the ability to make it so...” he whispered sadly.

“... so I could not see the blood. Sometimes, it's all I see if I see my own fur. I can't make myself not see it, and somehow I always feel like everyone else sees it too.” Leal's heart sank. It was not easy for Ceriss. It was brutal to her. It did terrible damage to her every time she had to take another life. Leal gritted his teeth and pulled her forward in an embrace. She quivered a little, trying perhaps unsuccessfully to restrain her emotions. He would not fear Ceriss anymore. He would try to fight harder so she did not have to wield that terrible scythe again. Her hands should not be stained again. He inhaled raggedly and then pushed his lips to hers. This, he thought, would let her know he was over that fear he had. Gone were any reservations that he might have felt to working with her. And she kissed back with as much passion as he gave.

Inside of seconds they were a tangle of emotionally driven embraces, kisses, soft nips, reminders of the intimacy they shared with the battle all but forgotten. Leal growled with fierce desire as Ceriss gripped his shoulders and pulled herself tighter up onto him, the armless chair letting her straddle his thighs easily in a rather intimacy-inspiring fashion. Her fur remained bright white, her shadow not returning. She did not need it. Not for him. It filled him with joy to know that. He pulled at her robes, and they fell away from her shoulders as she unclasped the two clasps of his chainmail up to his neck, and then pulled the twelve pound shirt upward and off of him, eagerly freeing him of his tunic after. Leal considered that she might be after more energy, but that did not feel even remotely like what this was about. She was happy that he saw through the ugliness battle had shown him.

The lady wolf pushed her hips forward again as the guard kicked his boots and trousers off hastily, smoldering in another wet, tongue-tangled kiss. The next heated moment had pouting wet flesh kissing against his own turgid shaft, his erection almost painful in its sudden emergence. He clawed hotly at Ceriss' back as she pushed her thighs back and forth, stroking him against herself in those heavy, eager motions. Her robes pulled off of her shoulders, the lupine priestess presented her round, pert mammaries for the wolf whose lap she claimed. Leal eagerly pulled one of her thick teats into his mouth and suckled hungrily, gasping a short, hot breath through his nose as he felt his member pushed and stroked by Ceriss' dexterous fingers. She strummed him against her sex for a short moment before pushing his tip upward, and impaling her depths upon him, driving herself hard down into his lap with a happy groan.

Leal panted out, his chin over Ceriss' shoulder, a little shocked at how fast it had gone from tears of regret and sorrow, to his flesh being tightly gripped inside her, feeling her pulsate around him excitedly. He didn't mind it though. He felt like he needed it. It gave him more strength after what he had lost in that battle, and made him feel closer to Ceriss. Was he supposed to? Surely she

knew how he would feel about having such closeness shared. He closed his eyes as she kissed him again and began to roll her thighs in long, flowing strokes. She drew his cock almost completely out of her, then pushed him easily back in, every single motion seeming intent on causing him the most pleasure imaginable.

At first, it would have been easy for him to believe that she was doing it for the energy that he was able to provide, but her gasps of pleasure mixed with his own, and after a bit, each stroke terminated with her grinding him in deep and rubbing her sex tightly to the root of his cock. She was pleasuring herself just as eagerly as she was him. This was about the pleasure they intended to share, not about the energy she wished to gain, even though Leal would have proudly given it to her. He closed his eyes, giving a long groan of pleasure as she slowly picked up speed. He parted his thighs a little to brace his feet, pushing up tighter into the priestess each time that she bottomed out, giving a hot little grunt with each impact of their bodies.

It was easy to get carried away, which was why neither noticed until it was too late to react that someone had pushed a key into the lock. Both looked right, toward the door, to see who would dare interrupt, hot, panting bodies frozen in a deep grind. The door swung open, and a guard, younger than Leal, poked his head in to see what was going on, and why the study that was normally open had been locked. Ceriss flicked her ears a bit, and then huffed hotly, just resuming her ride. Leal tightened up, blushing severely. He worked with that fellow, and that was the first time Leal had even considered that it might ever be known that the things he got up to in the castle were not the most professional. Ceriss, however, did not seem to care what this might do to Leal's professional relationships in the castle. Surely Lunariss would know about this. The other guard's eyes shot wide, and he backed out slowly, his shoulder bumping the wall by the door, the brown-furred lupine turning rather suddenly, closing and locking the door. The remaining guard, ridden steadily by a passionate priestess, looked back to his heated companion.

"Well, that will make it back to Lunariss." He chuckled a bit meekly at that, hoping that it would not cause troubles.

"He will certainly not be able to blame you for this. After all, it was a locked room, he will scold the guard for poking his nose in without knocking." It comforted Leal a bit to know Ceriss at least was not worried about news of this desperate tryst getting out. He lowered his head, kissing at the bouncing lady's breasts as they jumped into reach, then bounced back out. He felt her thighs slap harder against his own, and then a hard wriggling grind as she growled with obvious release, her sex drawing up tight around him. His scrotum tightened as well, and he growled out sultrily,

“Ceriss, I’m close...” She allowed it before, but he did not just assume that she intended that for him again. She began bouncing heavily again, her honey spilling down his sack and onto the chair. No, she actually did intend that for him again, it seemed. “I’m gonna cum...” he gasped, just to be sure.

“Do it, love! spray it inside me... nnnmmnnh!” The lady wolf ground tightly to him. She did not utter a word, nothing in that odd language of hers, no incantations or strange effects... as he sprayed his heavy load hard into her suckling depths she just groaned in sinking release of her own, cumming along with him as she ground her sex tight to his base, stirring her orgasm eagerly. This moment was entirely about the union of their bodies and their need for one another. Leal folded his ears back as he spilled every drop into her, and clutched her tight, his embrace not intended to merely show want, but love. He wanted to let Ceriss feel love. Her life was not about war, it was about who she protected now, and he would protect her too. He rocked his body hard as she squeaked in her spasming release.

The pair quivered together for a while, holding one another, not saying a word. It felt so good to Leal. It was less about the hot and heavy encounter he had before with Ceriss where she used her abilities to evoke a more powerful emotional response in the illusion of Nita, and more about the absolute longing passionate moments he had shared with Misty. His life was so strange, and dangerous too, but he would not trade it at that point. Not for anything. Ceriss relaxed against Leal, and looked into his eyes, wagging her tail slowly as she savored the full feeling she had. He was not slipping out of her if he could help it. He liked the feeling he had inside her.

“So... Are you ready to learn the technique for essence-tracking?” Ceriss asked gingerly. Leal gave her a blank stare, and then chuckled numbly.

“Oh, Ceriss, I had honestly forgotten that was why we came in here.” He laughed. She grinned and pushed him deeper again, making him wince with pleasure. She leaned back some, holding her hands in front of her lovely chest.

“Now then... Leal...” He peered at her chest a bit obviously. He then shook his head a little as a glowing string appeared between her fingers. “Do you see that?” she asked. It was hard to see. It was like a dark afterimage that one saw if they looked at a light for a bit, then at a white wall, but it was very hard to focus on. The line made a waving motion, like ocean waves between her fingers. He nodded to her.

“I see something, yes.” He offered. He was not sure what he was supposed to see.

“What is it?” she asked.

"It's a line. Like a string. It's a little thicker." He was not sure if that was what he was supposed to be seeing.

"What's the string doing?" the priestess asked.

"It's doing this..." Leal made wave motions with his hand. Ceriss smiled, and gave a pleasant squeeze around the guard's softening shaft internally. It was a sweet reward for getting that right.

"You are looking at the essence." Ceriss stated. "I have made it a little easier for you to see. It's like seeing it illuminated. That's not the same as seeing it on your own. It's the difference between seeing a shadow on a silk screen with a light behind it, and knowing what is behind the silk screen with no light. You have to see differently. I want you to look at this essence very carefully for a while, Leal. Stare at it and look slowly past it to my chest, until you can no longer see my chest, just let your vision kind of fade out. Eventually, all you will be able to see is the line, okay?" Leal nodded at that, and spoke in a whisper as he stared, as if the volume of his voice would make him fail in this offered task.

"I'm not Letai. Are you sure I will be able to see the essence at all?" he was worried about why she felt that he could even accomplish a goal that sounded tailor made for a Letai. The world seemed to slowly be getting darker. He had noticed this when staring at text for a long time or something of that nature, so that alone did not seem so strange.

"We all can see the essence if shown how, it's just a lot harder to actually manipulate it. Some see the essence more clearly than others, of course, but you have powerful essence of your own, Leal. You will do fine. Just keep focusing." Ceriss explained. Leal nodded and did as he was told. Slowly but surely, the world went darker and darker. As the world got darker, the string changed. It went from being a dark string on a bright world, to a bright line in the darkness. It was eventually a light peach-colored band of bright light, and he could see nothing else.

"It's all dark except for the line. It's orange color." He continued to watch it. Ceriss spoke again.

"Alright, what is it doing now?" she asked.

"It..." He watched carefully. The line seemed to disconnect from between her fingers, and coil in on itself, and form a little orb, which went up and down slowly. "It's a ball now, and it's going up... down... up... down..." The priestess spoke again.

“Very good. Relax yourself fully, do not move at all. I am going to touch you, and you tell me where I am touching without taking your gaze off that ball, alright?” she asked. The wolf nodded. Ceriss touched his ears with her fingertips.

“Ears.” He stated. She then touched his nose. He chuckled a little, finding that kind of silly. “Nose.” She chuckled as well. “Shoulders.” He stated as her fingers graced along his shoulders. Then, he felt a sudden sense of confusion. He felt her fingertips come to rest on his eyes. He normally might have flinched to have someone touch his eyes, but those fingers were touching his eyelids. He held perfectly still, and whispered, “Eyes. My eyes are closed. I still see it.” He felt a thrill of excitement race through him. To have essence ability is one of the most popular fantasies of children at play. Letai were revered, particularly by those who loved peace and justice with adventurous streaks. Leal had one an ocean wide. To find he had the ability to see the essence, to be taught this by a real Letai priestess, was a dream. He could not help but feel an intense swelling of ego. He was then snapped a little back to reality as Ceriss squeezed his softening member out of her. He opened his eyes after she moved her fingertips off of those lids, and he lost sight of the essence.

“Is that it?” he asked. Ceriss nodded to him, smiling.

“Essentially, yes. I had assumed it might take hours to get that far, but this gives us time to practice it. We will let you look at that essence again and again until I do not have to even start out with it visible. You will train your mind to see it without being shown first.” Leal panted slightly, overwhelmed with the intense joy of learning such a coveted skill.

“How will this help me find the crystal?” he asked.

“Essence can be seen through things, usually. If you see essence easily, you can find things that are hidden. The queen could find the crystal easily enough, if she were here for instance. I can see it too if I got close to it. You can see how many people are in a room before you enter. You can follow the slight echo of their essence through a maze if you had to. But you will not have the ability to see the essence of people for a while. The essence of a fully charged crystal like what would be needed to control the Uruk will be easy to see, but you will have to get within a couple hundred feet of it. It will be bright, and likely long, about as long as you are tall, if not larger. You will see it the moment you come close to it if you are looking for the essence. Hopefully your little thief friend will have a general area you can search. When it’s found, do not attempt to do anything on your own. Come and get the captain. This cannot fail.” Leal nodded, and, with the priestess, continued to practice, taking the occasional break to kiss and embrace, and just savor the peace of being in her company, her shadow dropped, her body his to worship and enjoy.

The day had again heated up, the sun was getting lower in the afternoon sky, and the travel had been productive. Lira paused every quarter mile or so to hop up into a tree to check the riverbed ahead, but eventually the trees gave way to rolling plains. There were even small cottages dotting the land in the distance, pushed back away from that dusty dry natural path. Reika and Lyat spent a lot of time talking to one another, and to Lira in their Asuna tongue. Lira was concerned that there may have been an Uruk base fairly close by because of the number they had encountered on the riverbed the previous day. They were all cautious. Nita and Luna spent time discussing how the beautiful ceremony of bonding would go, and everyone was overjoyed to know it would happen so soon. Lira in particular was excited because she would be taken right to the ruins of a temple that belonged to a High Priestess. She could easily ask Luna anything about the Letai she wanted, but somehow the artifacts were still highly coveted.

The conversation lilted from one pleasant thing to another, and occasionally back to the highly successful fight the day before. That was something that Reika was especially happy to talk about. Alps was given the impression that there was a lot of rage that had been building up for very long time that was let out in that fight. He felt it might be therapeutic to allow her to kill any lone Uruk they might find. Lyat seemed fairly happy about the fight as well, but he seemed happier to just walk alongside Nidaja. Alps found that he was secretly pleased every time he saw the large Asuna take Nidaja's hand, or loop his elbow with hers as they walked. They were fast becoming more than friends and he could not be happier to see it.

Vhale had stayed back from the fight, not allowing himself to use his powers and not wanting even the temptation to do so. He had little to add to the conversation about the fight, but he did talk a lot to Luna when she was not discussing the wedding plans. He actually always seemed happiest when talking with her. Something about the lady lupine comforted him. Perhaps she used her essence to caress him in a way to lighten the burden of his sorrow. Alps was not sure, but he would clam up if Alps approached, so he usually just let them be and allowed them to talk. He was sure that if his mother was working on helping the former dark one, he would be fine eventually. It seemed like nothing could shake the genuinely positive travelling mood, and they were making great time. Lira, however, changed the mood abruptly.

"Oh no, this is terrible..." Everyone slowed their pace, and moved forward cautiously as they saw what the green-furred guide was looking at. There, on the ground, was a young grey-furred lupine lad, shirtless, face down. He lay perfectly still. The fur along his back in a long line was rust-brown. He had been slashed with a hook-like weapon. He appeared to be dead. The boy could not

have been more than nine years old. Alps could not will himself to move. He'd seen death in his journey, but looking at a slaughtered child was very different.

"Who... did this?" whimpered Nita, immediately near tears. Nidaja pointed out flat-looking three-toed prints in the dust. They were clearly Uruk prints.

"Take a guess." She growled. Alps knelt down by the child. He was this small once. He would have been, back then, very easy prey for Uruk. Those days were filled with concerns of not being smacked around by Chana, but he didn't have to ever face real intended death like this poor boy had. Nita sniffled. Alps put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Please don't. I don't want to see his face." Nita whispered.

"I have to." Alps said softly. "I have to know his face because this is who we are fighting for. This is why we are not going to fail."

"There is smoke over the third hill to the west, the tracks go that way. Safe to say where the Uruk camp is." Lira stated, looking around carefully. "The poor child got too close. I bet he never even knew."

"I bet his parents don't even know." Nita cried softly. Alps pulled him over. He looked peaceful. He looked like he might have been fast, clever, and maybe he loved to laugh with his friends. Luna knelt down at his other side.

"*I KILL!!!*" The sudden shout from Reika jarred everyone, Alps nearly toppling over. The hyena female bolted across the plains in the direction of the smoke, Bone held in hand, her feet carrying her faster than it looked like her frame could move. "Uruk dead! Uruk are *dead!*" her cries were heard as she gained distance between herself and the group. Lyat bolted after her.

"She is maybe doing it! I having to stop her!" he called as he ran after her. Alps looked to his mother, and to Nidaja. The general nodded to the white lupine male.

"Go! I don't think anyone other than you can calm her down." She shouted.

"Aris!" Luna barked suddenly. "He's alive! Barely! Tell her that! Let her know!" His mother's hands suddenly blazed with green light as she planted them on the lad's chest. He arched. It was true. He was alive. He might be saved. If Reika got to that camp, she would not be. Alps could not possibly catch up to Reika, and Lyat was pulling away, but if he could catch her and hold her, the white lupine male might be able to calm her down and keep her from going on this suicide run. This was not the time for them to lose one of their valuable friends on their journey. Not when they were so close to happier days.

Alps ran at full tilt, pulling Ressaia out in case he needed it to trip Reika. She was deceptively fast for being rather short, and he was not gaining on her. They had cleared one hill... then another... Reika was cresting the third, Lyat hot on her heels. Alps had never seen the lady hyena this angry. He felt sorry for anyone getting in her way, and then realized that he was about to get in her way. He hoped telling her the boy was alive would be enough. Could Luna save him? He looked really bad. Reika vanished over the third hill. Then Lyat vanished over the third hill. He was still only barely starting to catch up. Panting raggedly, he topped the hill, and then skidded to a stop, his body almost going limp. He fell to his knees.

The camp on the other side of the hill was huge. There were dozens of tattered cloth tents, and several fires arranged in a circle to appear like they were only one. The worst revelation was what came in that following moment. Reika was not stopping. Her brother ran behind her as fast as he could, trying to catch up, but she was on the outskirts of the camp already. A loud rapid thumping on a drum made it clear. Reika had been seen, and Uruk came pouring out of the tent. They seemed like they were not ending. Alps staggered a bit. If he ran back to get help, Reika and Lyat would die. If he stayed and tried to help, he might be able to frighten off some of their attackers with his unusual staff, but no help would likely come, and if they did, Nita and the others might also be doomed. Alps heard soft footfalls behind him. It was Lira, perhaps running to scope out the camp.

"Go back!" Alps shouted at her. "There must be 120 of them here, Reika's already been made, get back! Get the others to cover!" Alps cried. He then bolted in the direction of Reika and Lyat. If he could cause enough confusion with his staff, he might be able to help the hyenas slip away. He felt numb. How could this happen now? What was Reika thinking? She was possibly dooming the mission out of uncontrolled rage. Alps found his number to be about accurate, more than a hundred Uruk were rushing to meet Reika. When it came to an attack by two Asuna, it seemed that they did not mess around.

"Reika!" Lyat cried, sobbing with grief, drawing his sword, ready to fight for his sister, ready to lose his life. Alps extended Ressaia and skidded to a halt beside Lyat.

"I will distract them with Ressaia. Get Reika out of here! Don't worry about me, I will figure something out!" Alps lied.

"No! What are you doing here! Run away! Go with Nita!" Lyat cried, tears in his eyes.

"We stand together as brothers!" Alps shouted, and dashed in the direction of Reika as the first eight or nine Uruk reached her. Alps felt lost. He felt like he

was already dead and was just watching a play detailing his last moments. It felt empty. It felt awful. But he was already there, and he would make sure Reika knew that for all that was lost, she was not alone. The flood of Uruk came.

Sirius, Book IV

A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 10

The orange glow of the setting sun seemed an appropriate lighting for the end of a life. It would soon all be dark. Would Nita and Luna and the others succeed without him? Would Luna comfort the queen enough for her to go on? These thoughts seemed to come so slowly to Alps, even though the world moved quickly. Why did it all feel so slow? He moved as fast as he could, reaching Reika just before the first of the Uruk did. She had stopped to brace herself for the fight, otherwise Alps would have never caught up to her. Stunned by Alps throwing himself into the fray, Lyat was only a few steps behind him.

"Die!" Reika screamed to the first of the Uruk, and swung Bone in an arc from low to high. Alps was surprised by the kinetic force that hyena must have used, as the entire front of that golem was removed, including the eyes, sent sailing far over the others. Lyat came to a stop just on Alps' other side looking bewildered.

"Run wulf!" he cried. "My sister!" Alps held his staff tightly as the next arrived. He didn't even get to touch it before Reika repeated the motion from before with just the same result, despite an attempt by the golem to block. It was not strong enough to stop the hyena girl's furious blow. Her eyes were wet with tears of rage. There was no reaching her now. There was no running either. He would be followed and he stood a better chance with his Asuna friends than he did alone. He was told to rely on his friends, to believe in them. It was time to put that to the test.

"My sister too!" Alps launched himself forward, parrying two weapons and tagging two Uruk. They were then defenseless to the attack of the hyena behind Alps. So began a rapid flurry in a seemingly easily repeated pattern. The pair stood back to back as Alps tagged golems with his staff, the hyena circled around and cleaved the defenseless targets down. They tried to corral Reika and separate her from the fight, but she was blind furious. Some of the damage she did with Bone, his face wiped away by vicious impacts already. She had insane force with each swing, enough that Alps wondered if Bone somehow assisted in those impacts. The other damage she did was that if too many got too close she would push her way into their flailing weapons, surely taking injuries, and she would begin just ripping off their arms. In short order there were armless Uruk staggering around, trying to get out of the way of the functioning ones, a sea of

yellow glowing eyes pushing forward slowed to walking speed in the waning light.

“Child killers! Take take take! Stop taking from nice wulfs! Leave Asuna alone! No more you take!” Reika sobbed with fury, bleeding from her head and her back. She wind-milled violently with Bone making it impossible for Alps to get closer to her. Inevitably, as Lyat and Alps had their own Uruk to fight, they pinched her off from the group, causing Lyat to wail with grief.

“Reika, no! Stop this! Come back, we run! This is crazy!” She was deaf to him. Alps gritted his teeth. He had to do something to save her. She pushed deeper into the confused and bustling crowd of Uruk. If Alps and Lyat were paying attention, they might have been somewhat proud of the twenty or so husks that littered the battlefield, but they were paying more attention to the hundred that remained. Alps heard a scream from the hilltop. It was Nita. Damn it, she should have been far away by then. He did not have the luxury of even looking for her.

It was all falling apart. He could not reach Reika. He could not get her under control. If they could pull back, Nita might be able to blast a group of them with a fireball. Luna might be able to root and shred a few. Lira could lend her sword. Even Vhale, as much as he didn't want to, might be able to break his promise not to use the essence and remind these creatures who their master once was. But if Reika was already dead, it was all for nothing.

Essence. Alps thought about the essence as he considered the attacks that Luna might be able to do. He wished that he could use the essence himself, but he was essentially worthless. He tagged two more and Lyat began fashioning a wall of the scattered broken Uruk. There was a loud explosion deeper in the group. Nita's fireball. Now they would be after her. Alps then grunted, feeling an impact, then fiery pain in his side. He was hooked by one of those savage weapons, and it hurt terribly. He tagged his attacker and pushed closer to Lyat, who seemed to be tiring. Alps' muscles were unable to keep up as well. He gasped and heaved, body burning for air as he moved in circles with the Asuna male. Where was Reika? Where did she go? They were being pushed back up the hill, so he looked down toward the camp.

Reika was surrounded, bleeding badly front and back, and still hewing with Bone at the crowded Uruk who were keeping their distance and just picking at her, taking an opportunistic cut any time the chance presented itself. She was no longer dropping any Uruk; they were closing in for the kill. Her muscles were burned out, she was losing a lot of blood, and her expression was entirely different. The madness had worn off. She was conscious again. And she was scared. She tried in vain to defend herself as Alps felt blood spilling copiously down his side. *Boom!* Another fireball. Alps shoulder-checked a lunging Uruk into the ground with the pauldron the fox had given him and drove his staff into one of the crystal eyes. It shattered, leaving the fallen golem impaired.

"I'm sorry!" sobbed Reika, seeming so far away. She fell to her knees, still waving Bone desperately. The Uruk were no longer attacking as heavily at Alps and Lyat either, they had begun to regroup to go after Nita and the others. Alps looked in anguish to the tattered hyena girl so close to death and still fighting. He wished he could save her, but his own strength was waning and he feared that he would die right in front of his beloved. He looked to Lyat for protection as he was having trouble raising his staff anymore, but Lyat was bleeding too. When had he been injured? It looked like it was a grazing cut to the side of his head, but it was hard to tell. This is not how the day was supposed to end. He cried out to Nita an anguished apology, and then a loud crack was heard, like thunder, something Alps had not heard Nita do before. He glanced in the direction he heard it, toward Reika, and staggered back a bit as he took in a completely unexpected sight.

The fox, Ellis, was there beside Reika, stooped down with her hand upon the ground. Around her in a ring were shattered remains of Uruk that seemed to have exploded outward. Reika was on her knees, stunned and wavering. She reached out for the fox shakily.

"Help Reika..." she whimpered. "Is sorry..."

Time seemed to stand almost completely still for Alps. How had the fox even gotten over to her? He never saw her enter the battle. How had she destroyed ten or twelve Uruk in an instant? The black and white vixen stood up slowly, a look of casual disgust on her face toward the Uruk. Her long white hair and black robes trimmed in silver waved in the winds that swept the scent of death and smoke across the field. She faced the group that surged from the direction of the village as the regrouping had finished, the Uruk ready to overwhelm their attackers once and for all. Another explosion sounded, this time behind Alps at the advancing Uruk that had left Alps and Lyat alone and were heading up the hill toward Nita. How many fireballs could she do? Nita may have been at her limit as well. Alps looked back to Ellis as Lyat dropped two more Uruk, the larger Asuna's chest heaving, gasping for air from the exertion of a fight for his life that had already gone on too long. The white former slave clutched his side. He felt light-headed and numb. He could not go on. They would lose. Reika dropped against Ellis, holding herself up against the vixen as her blood drained away. She offered Bone to the fox. Her precious Bone.

"Fox fight!" she sobbed. "Friends always help. Please?" The dizzy hyena coughed and sputtered a bit, breaking Alps' heart to watch. Ellis took bone in her hand, and held it up a bit, gazing at it. Her voice was then clear as she spoke loudly to Reika.

"This is the terrible loss you risk when your anger rules you." she scolded. "Your friends will die for you. Would you have it be for nothing, girl?" Alps felt a

little life slip back into him in the form of rage. Reika was dying, and even now the fox would dare to lecture her like that? She was begging for help!

“Reika is sorry! Please save friends! Please!” she sobbed weakly. The fox then turned to face the advancing tide of Uruk that pushed forward rapidly, making it obvious they would just run the whole group over. Would Ellis just be run over too, just to make a point to the foolish hyena? Alps didn’t want to watch, but he could not look away as the tide of Uruk headed up the hill like a grey and brown flood. Ellis held a dark and disapproving expression.

“Before you ask the help of friends who tend to arrive late, Reika...” She lowered Bone down to her side and held it tightly in her fingers, facing the advancing troop of golems. “...You should learn the power of the friends you’ve had with you all along.” The fox reared back a little, taking a deep breath and for a brief moment Alps thought he could see wispy tendrils of golden essence trailing up along her arm over the sleeve of her robe all the way to the side of her neck as she leaned forward toward the oncoming Uruk.

What happened next defied all explanation to Alps. Ellis opened her mouth as if she were screaming... but instead of the shrill scream he was expecting, a torrent of white flame erupted from the vixen’s wide parted muzzle, accompanied by a nearly deafening roar, a sound that Alps knew would haunt his dreams for some time. The fox blasted that intense wave of flame like an expanding wall blown from her unwavering lips and Alps had to shield his eyes from the brightness of it as she turned slowly to engulf the entire advancing group. The ones who had been heading for Nita recognized the real threat and turned around, heading back down the hill. That wave of flame rolled down the hill and engulfed the Uruk camp, the roar continuing as the crescent wave of white flame terminated hundreds of feet beyond, leaving only charred wasteland in its wake and wet-looking bubbling orange glowing glass where sand had been bare to it. Nothing at all was left of the Uruk or structures that had been in the way of it. Alps looked back up to the advancing group of golems. Barely over a dozen remained.

There was utter silence from everyone else on the battlefield. Even the Uruk stood motionless a moment, whether caught in that fireblast or not. The wolf wavered, trying to focus on the blurry sight before him, pain wracking his whole body from pushing himself beyond his limits, being injured, and his grief over having to see a dear friend ravaged by those cruel halberds and hooks of the Uruk.

The fight had looked like it was to be an inescapable death and now Lyat roared with new life as he clutched his sword in both hands, ready to meet the returning Uruk. Alps struggled to stay on his feet. His wound hurt and he felt weak from blood loss, but he could fight. He could stand a bit longer and see this through to the end. The Uruk made a mistake in turning their back to Nidaja and

Lira, they both hit the group from behind, and Alps moved as fast as he could to tag the ones he could reach with his staff. They had not realized yet what Ressaia was doing to them because Lyat had been cleaving them so fast. The white lupine male's renewed attack was rather short-lived however. Alps went backwards hard as he felt a stinging blow to his face and head and felt wet heat spill into his eyes, blood blurring his vision. He had been hit again. He shook the blood from his face and watched through one eye as he fought. This was certainly not the glorious battle they had known before. This was no mere skirmish; this was Alps' first true battle. He looked over at where Reika and Ellis had been. To his surprise, Ellis was still there. He watched as the vixen released Bone from her grasp, letting it fall to Reika's side as she spat a wisp of white flame onto the grass and reached up to wipe her muzzle with the back of her hand. Reika lay on her back, sprawled out, possibly dead with Bone lying just out of reach as if she'd not been saved at all, her outstretched hand reaching for him, but her body still and quiet. The blackened fields and still-glowing sands reminded him that Ellis had intervened in a big way, but it looked as if the mighty Reika, tragically, had fallen. The black-furred vixen looked directly at Alps, seeming disappointed. Ellis voice rang out clear in across the battlefield.

"You can do better than this." He was certain he heard her speak directly to him, but her mouth never moved, and she was far enough away that he'd not have heard her so well. He watched as Ellis strode off, a slender, slightly curved single-edged sword in her hand. She moved toward the remaining Uruk ahead until she passed in almost ethereal slow motion from Alps' field of vision in his one good eye. He tried to open the other to follow her, but the blood and the searing pain on that side of his head made it impossible. How could she always leave without him actually seeing it? Alps looked back with his good eye to Lyat. His jaw went slack, and he slowly lowered his sword in silent awe. What was he seeing? What was the fox doing? Was she still fighting? Whatever Lyat saw gave pause even to a seasoned warrior.

"Luna hurry! There are injuries!" Alps recognized Nita's voice. All he could really remember as he dropped onto his back on the ground with a puff of tan dust was that he was so happy that she was alive. Fighting still went on around him. Lyat and Nidaja and Lira still had six or eight enemies to contend with. How many were left ahead? He wanted to get up. So very badly, Alps wanted to get up and help his friends fight, but his arms and legs would not work. He tried to get up, but no movement occurred. Were his other friends okay? Would he see them again? He saw Luna's face appear over him, her expression horrified.

"Help Reika! She's worse! Help Reika!" Alps tried to scream, but what came out was barely a sound. Then, all sounds became distant and hollow, pain muted, and the already darkening world fell upward and into infinity as all went black.

The rain hammered down hard enough that it was hard to hear his own footfalls as Leal moved briskly along the row of squat, dilapidated shacks and crumbling houses that were the part of Diera that had been damaged severely in a flood during a storm ten years before. This place had since become a location that even the town guard avoided if at all possible, but this was a place that seemed logical to search, given that they were looking for something that was supposed to be hidden from those who had authority in the city.

Leal had practiced for two hours in seeing the essence. Ceriss had been very pleased, in fact slightly surprised by how quickly he learned to recognize not only essence itself, but different kinds. She held him longer than she might have originally intended because she wanted to prepare him as best he could. He had gotten so efficient at it that, as he moved along, he could see it slightly, ever so lightly, in places that the priestess had told him he would not until he'd been training longer. He was not sure if it was because he had just slept with a powerful priestess and shared in her essence, so he did not want to waste time or ability. He could, if he looked hard enough, see the essence of those who were laughing or happy, or furious or afraid. Strong emotions made the essence easier for him to see. He even saw a slight variance in color based on the emotion involved.

He did not waste much time studying the different kinds, he made his way quickly to a side of town he did not want to check once it was completely dark. The sun was already waning and he moved along the narrow alleyways as he looked for any bright source of essence. The rain actually made his task easier as he had fewer people looking at him. His cloak did not merely disguise his identity, it was needed for the weather so he didn't attract unwanted attention by trying to be inconspicuous. He could not see anything around these shanties and broken buildings, so he was prepared to leave, however he heard something of a commotion in one of the darker, more flooded alleys. He crept along cautiously to see if it might lead him in a direction that might be helpful.

"She's inside. She hasn't given up a word. She laughs when we strike her. She says she's a thief and was following a mark, but none of the others came back!" Leal was immediately interested.

"Then kill her and move! We can't stay here if they were stopped, we might be compromised!" Leal had to get closer and help Neit if he could. He did not want her to perish because she followed Lunaris' orders. That's the sort of thing that could get one haunted forever. He moved back into an archway that was once part of a storage shed and hunkered down as the one who gave the kill order ran from the alley. The other went into a building that seemed to be a small warehouse, pulling a rolling heavy door only part way closed. Leal moved to the

edge of the doorway and peered in through the gap between two posts that made one side of the doorway.

His suspicions were right. Neit was bound to a chair, half naked, head hanging, ears back, blood on her mouth as she laughed.

"I keep tellin' ya, if your friends are in trouble, you are wasting time with me, I'm just here to nick your goodies." She spit blood on the floor. Leal put a hand over the place where he had been slightly stabbed. They had patched that up nicely and it was still sore. He and Neit now both had injuries from their defense of the crown. Would she understand the honor of it? He lowered his body. The girl was not alone. There were four people in the room with her, standing in a circle around her. A slender, ragged-looking lady wolf with black and silver fur and matted, bound-back hair spoke.

"I don't believe you! You had no reason to follow us all the way back. But it's fine, you won't be taking any stories back to your friends, even if they are just stories of taking things. We are gonna kill you anyway, girl. This is how the Sons of Sorrow deal with impertinent brats!" Neit looked up boldly. She had apparently lost her fear with a bit of beating. She did not look too badly injured, but she seemed pretty pissed all the same, her red essence was visible to Leal, even though he had just learned to see it. He looked around the room. Was there anything he could use as cover if he ran in and pulled Neit away? He could not get her untied and fight at the same time. Two dark-furred cloaked wolves drew their heavy swords. The scene played itself out under the warm glow of twin lanterns on either side of Neit which gave the questioning an almost surreal feel.

"I have last words for you worms then." Neit growled. The assassins drew closer. Leal's heart raced, fearful of watching the girl die, even though he barely knew her. She might have had a price on her head before and was destined for death, but she threw her lot in with the royal house and that granted her his care, at the very least, but what could he do?

"Oh?" asked the lady wolf, a broken-toothed smile leered at the bound Neit, her breasts spattered with blood dropping from her nose and muzzle.

"Long... live... *the Queen!*" she barked, and spit blood in the matron's face. She growled with rage, and all of their essence flared up bright red, as Neit shrank in blue-lit terror at the death that was coming.

Leal made his decision in an instant. He embraced his new ability and a new way to use it. The guard launched himself into the room.

"*Long live the Queen!*" he howled, throwing them all off guard. They jumped back to the four corners of the room to avoid him, preparing for the

offensive but they were not his immediate target. He planted his boot in Neit's chest and sent her and the chair she was bound to across the room before smashing both lanterns in a single stroke.

"I can't see!" cried one of the attackers. Leal gripped his long, utilitarian guard's sword. He growled out viciously.

"Too bad. I can see *you*." The outlines of essence circled the room clumsily, perhaps searching for the exit, but the stormy weather made it as dark outside as it was inside, and their eyes had been accustomed to the lanterns. With the ability to see that glowing haze at the center of each, he knew their positions, and used long thrusts to keep himself at length as he drove his blade into the core of each. He was surprised how quickly the essence vanished from each point when he did that, confirming the success of his attack. He spun about the room quickly, as the chair had been the only thing in it. There was nothing but him, his sword, and easy glowing targets. Ceriss had taught him. Killing was bad, but what these people wanted was worse. He would do this for all of Amani. A grunt, a yell of agony, a female scream, and a gasp and gurgle and it was over.

After all four essence-marks had been snuffed by his blade he looked to the back of the room. Still there was one more essence. It was blue with fear. There was a silence except for the din of rain and the soft puffing of her breath.

"It's alright Neit..." She jerked a little as Leal touched her face. "I've got you." She whimpered a bit, trying to choke it back, but then sobbed for a bit. He leaned in, soaking wet but he held her in the darkness.

"They were going to kill me!" she cried.

"It's alright, I stopped it, they won't hurt anyone ever again. Let's get you out of here, and someplace safe." Leal felt a rush of absolute joy. One of the most valuable things to the wolf was his honor and valor and he had just rescued someone who needed him. It was an emotion beyond what Misty or Ceriss had given him. This was what a royal guard was for, he thought. This was what he was supposed to be. He grinned as he carefully cut the bonds from Neit, and he gave her his cloak, before leading her out of the corpse-lined room. As they exited the building, Neit holding his hand tightly, still shaking from cold and wet as much as waning fear, they stole along the alleyway, and into a more brightly lit, safer portion of town. They stayed at a brisk pace, but did not try to attract attention to themselves.

"Th-thank you, Leal. I'm sorry I questioned your abilities as a guard. I had heard the Royal Guard were a different breed, but I had not realized... That was..." She was impressed with the results of a risk that played out well for him, and he could not help but have his ego fanned a little by that.

“It’s alright, it might not have worked, but you got them off guard with your last little taunt. It was as much you as it was me.” The royal guard was not arrogant, after all. He had to be humble. “Neit, did you happen to see where else they might be hiding? Was there a place that looked like it might have been a base, because that surely was not it.” The former thief nodded a bit, her ponytail bouncing.

“Yes, Leal. I saw it. It’s a manor by the bay. The docks are right by it. I think they probably get in and out of the city and do their trading from there. From the way they were talking, they were afraid I saw something important at that house. I... I don’t want to go back there, Leal.” Neit shivered a bit.

“I won’t make you. We will tell Lunaris where it is, and you can let the town guard handle this part. It’s time to carve a little justice for Diera out of these fools.” He began to move quickly toward the castle with Neit. She would be taken care of and kept safe there and the issue of the crystal would be taken care of with an entire day to spare.

Leal felt his cheeks warm a bit as the girl’s hand tightened in his own. It was an affectionate grasp and she pulled herself closer against him, making the pair look less like comrades in a secret war on Diera’s street, and more like lovers walking home on a rainy evening. The guard did not mind this, and pulled her closer still, letting her loop an arm around him as they padded briskly to the castle gates. It was almost two and a half hours of walking to get them there, and he could tell that Neit, who had not slept and was pretty soundly beaten, was exhausted. Lunaris met them at the gate and ushered them inside. An attendant, the same who had helped Leal’s wound, tended to the more minor scrapes and bruises of the former thief.

As this was done, she provided the information to Lunaris, giving a description of the house. The captain of the guard knew easily which house it was. It had been purchased years ago by someone who was reputed to have been a recluse or simply did not live there at all. It was a perfect location to hide something large and important.

“Leal, get your cloak back from Neit, the guard’s been mustered and this is your duty too.” Lunaris belted on his sword. Leal sighed, tired from the running and fighting, and he still had not slept from the previous night, going on two days without sleep. War had a way of keeping one awake. How was Lunaris faring so well? Would they ever rest? He turned to tell Neit to be good, but she launched herself into his arms, and cupped her muzzle to his, her tongue probing his mouth deeply.

“Oy! None of that, you’ll lay open that lip again, girl!” cried the attendant, and she carefully pulled the kiss-stealing not-so-former thief off of the guard. Neit watched Leal as she was prodded off to go rest and recover. The grey-

furred wolf grinned, staggering a bit.

“Happy?” Lunar is asked, watching the sleepily stumbling happy Leal.

“Guarding’s good work.” He proclaimed. Lunar is laughed heavily.

The trip to the manor by the dock was slower than a normal walk because it involved having the guard fan out to move in small groups as quickly and quietly along the streets as possible to disguise their destination. They did not want to alert anyone to the attack, and they did not want to give the group a chance to sneak the crystal out to another location. During the winding, long trip to the manor Leal explained to Lunar is what he had done to win the fight against the four that had taken Neit, and he understood better why the girl had kissed him. The dark-furred wolf complimented Leal on his learning so quickly, and made him promise to teach him the technique in the future. He was unaware anything like it existed.

As they pushed toward the bay, Leal continued to use the ability he was taught, but he was so tired that he was having trouble focusing on things well. He hoped that the crystal would be easy to find or that the essence would really stand out as well. As they arrived at the manor, it was immediately obvious that the group had not evacuated. They had a dozen guards posted around the perimeter of the house. The three story manor rose above the stonework dock as the rain came to an end. It was the middle of the night, and there was little going on anywhere except around that house. It was as suspicious a thing as Leal had ever seen, but as he crept closer to the house, he saw a light at the top, gleaming right through the walls. The highest point of the house, perhaps to act as a beacon, was the home of the crystal they had been sent to retrieve. The people guarding all wore red trim on dark robes or leather armor. They were part of that wretched group of traitors. Lunar is smiled at Leal and nodded.

“You ready to do this?” he asked.

“I’m exhausted, my eyes hurt from looking at things weird, and I’ve not been dry all night.” He offered. “Let’s do this thing.” Lunar is took a big step right toward the manor. Leal widened his eyes. They were just going to walk right up to it? That was not what he thought they were doing. He thought the entire town guard would descend upon the house and he would help them find the crystal afterward.

“Can I have your attention please?” shouted Lunar is. A few of the guards around the house moved quickly to confront him. Others followed, pulling not so close, wanting to perhaps keep someone else from sneaking in. Once as many as he could get were looking at him, and surely some alert was sent to those waiting inside, Lunar is spoke again. “Her majesty does not enjoy being targeted for assassination. Do not bother surrendering. Do not bother laying down your

arms.” Leal widened his eyes. He wouldn’t. That evocation of law had not been used inside the city since Diera was made the new capitol. “I am Lunaris. By the powers granted Guard High Captain, and Second General of the Amanian Defense Force, those on this property, outside and within, are granted no leave. You are all sentenced to death.” And with that, the guard did descend, two hundred strong, weapons out, cries of war echoing into the night for the third round of killing the guard had seen in less than 36 hours.

He was glad to not be directly involved in the fighting, and perhaps Lunaris felt it too. They were both tired, and there only for what each were required to do. Lunaris was there to give that executive order of a death sentence with no trial, and Leal was there to search upstairs among fifteen broken and blood-soaked bodies where the crystal was stored in a plain-looking and unassuming crate that had been disguised as a dresser with a non-working bottom drawer. The crate was broken and a massive bluish-black crystal, six sides and double-terminated, was taken out. They put it in another crate and it left under heavy guard to the pier on the other side of town. Lunaris oversaw the careful investigation for a while, and the removal of a total of 34 bodies, the weight of two of those bodies in gold and jewels and documentation that might implicate others involved in the conspiracy.

After that was the long walk back to report to Misty. As wonderful a mood as they both should have been in, the walk was relatively silent. Both the guard and his captain were exhausted. Misty was awake, having napped, and heard the report. With both ragged, tired warriors before her, she listened, and ultimately, smiled.

“Lunaris... You have proven again your worth to the royal family, and you bring us pride and honor. You earn our name that you so rarely use to your benefit. Lunaris Razelle, do not hesitate to enjoy the benefits and rights of a royal house member. Your requests are always law to this land with all of our gratitude.”

“I ‘ave a royal request, Majesty.” The captain of the guard stated to the retainer of the throne.

“Anything at all.” Misty offered.

“A royal *bed*.” He barked shortly. Misty chuckled and bowed elegantly to him.

“A royal bath might do you well too, my champion.” She proclaimed playfully. “Yes, do rest. Thank you again. You are dismissed.” Leal marveled at that a moment. He had dutifully followed orders under Lunaris for a while, but he had not really seen him so subservient. Was he like that for Nidaja and Nita? They, along with Misty, were about the only three who outranked him. What was

it like to have that much power? “Leal!” called the stand-in queen. He snapped to attention, suddenly aware that he was sagging with exhaustion. Despite his familiarity with Misty, he refused to be rude to her in an official capacity like he was.

“Yes, Highness!” he stated solidly, standing up straight, with almost everything in his body hurting.

“You are well on your way to sharing the last name of the house Razelle yourself.” His heart skipped a beat. Her tone was serious, it was not playful affection. The highest honor that could be bestowed on a subject of the royal house was the honorary title. It did not just affect one’s immediate status, it changed the status of their family for three generations. Nobility was not a joke! He bowed low in appreciation.

“I long only to serve, your majesty!” he stated with a flourish.

“You will serve us well, Leal.” Misty stated. “And if I have my way, you will be serving us for a very long time. Do not take unnecessary risks.” She seemed to be scolding him. He nodded a little, confused. Her eyes wore genuine worry. He padded closer, in spite of himself.

“Misty.” He said, then remembering himself, “Your Highness...” She cupped his cheeks.

“I must ask that you and Lunaris accompany Ceriss to dispose of this crystal. This in and of itself should not be too dangerous, but it means little rest for you for just a few more days. Do not worry, I will keep a soft bed for you here.” She leaned in close, her lips at his ear. “... my bed is just as soft as you deserve...” He perked, and winced, his body too sore to get worked up. He suddenly felt that the trip off shore to take care of this task might be more valuable as time to recover from the intensity of his past few days so he could share Misty’s bed was offered. No finer reward could be offered for the new and eager castle guard.

Alps’ eyes fluttered open slowly. The lights were all washed out, and the voices were hard to make out. He listened carefully, still unable to move. He was in pain, though it was a dull pain, as if muffled somehow. He was moving, even though he felt unable to move a muscle. He realized as his senses slowly lifted above the dense fog that he was on a hastily fashioned stretcher. He was being carried along a road. He tried to speak but nothing came out. For some time, he could not even remember why he was injured. When he did remember, he tried desperately to look around. Reika. Where was Reika? Lyat’s head was

bandaged, and he was carrying the front of his stretcher. Nidaja was the one carrying at his feet. His eyes barely open it was hard to see her, but he could hear her, and knew she was carrying him. He heard Nita's voice too.

"Luca's another three miles. It won't take long to get there, but I don't think we will be there by sunset. There is no cause to hurry, we should rest at least once before we get there." She sounded strong and well. That was encouraging.

"He ees not heavy wulf." Lyat stated in his usual calm and gentle tone.

"And you haven't slept, so we will simply discount your offer of continued walking as incoherent sleepy babbling." Lira stated. Alps heard the sigh of the large Hyena. Was he sad? Resolved? Why had he not slept? Did Reika die? Lyat surely would not be able to sleep if his sister had died. Alps could not hold back tears, even though he could not really cry. He felt them roll down his cheek. He didn't see her. He could not hear her.

"How about it, Vahn?" asked Nita. "You good for a rest?" Alps perked as he heard a child's voice.

"If you like, ma'am. I can keep going if we need to though." His tone was tired, but genuine in his offer to keep going. Luna spoke.

"Let's stop, I think Aris' eyes just opened. I saw them gleaming." The plodding stopped, and he was lowered down into the grass on the side of a dusty road. They were supposed to be staying away from roads, but based on the conversation, it seemed that they were breaking that rule for some reason. Luna's face appeared over Alps' own.

"You awake?" she asked. Alps tried to nod. Nothing really happened.

"He's quiet." Nita said with a whimper.

"He's still stunned to keep him from using energy he doesn't have." Luna stated. I can tell he's awake. Alps, you can't talk or move right now. I was not able to heal you because I used all my stored essence before I got to you. You are stable, and we are getting you to some shelter until I can renew some of that energy and heal you properly, but for now, it's going to be uncomfortable, and you aren't going to be able to move or talk." Alps was able to at least move his eyes, and saw the young lupine child they had found nearly dead on the road look over him.

"Thanks for saving me, Alps." He said. "You don't remember me, but I remember you. We lived in the same town. My folks live just outside Luca, on a tuber farm. You guys can rest and hide there, I won't tell anyone, I swear." He

was called over by Lira and moved out of Alps' vision. Nita leaned over her lover and whispered. "We told him we were running from Jalana town guards. He's got no idea who we are. Kids are not great at keeping secrets. We will take that up with his parents, but we have to get there first." Alps screamed inside. Where was Reika?! Why wasn't anyone telling him about Reika?! Were they afraid the sorrow would cause him to get worse? He had to know! He wanted Lyat to check on him. He wanted to look into his eyes. He would know the moment he saw Lyat.

As if in answer to his inward scream, Lyat appeared over him. Alps' heart froze as he studied the large Asuna's face. He smiled wryly. Alps relaxed the muscles that were not actually able to be tensed and exhaled heavily.

"You attack many Uruk beside Lyat." He grinned broadly, further chasing Alps' worries away. "Reika gain another strong brother. She ees resting too, we heal you both. Hard fight, but everyone be okay!" Alps' heart soared. His worst fears were laid to rest. Why would Luna not just tell him that the second she saw he was conscious? She should have known that he would want to be told. But Lyat seemed to understand what was important right away.

His mind clear of that intense dread, he was free to consider other things. Like the searing agonizing pain in his side just under his ribs, and how the technique Luna used to keep him still made it feel like he was not getting enough air because his chest barely moved as he breathed. Alps found additional pain in realizing that if Luna had not been with them, Reika and Alps at the very least would be dead. He found only a little solace in the fact that it was his own energy, given to his mother, which saved them. He would *not* have reservations sharing that energy again.

The group began to walk again after resting about an hour. Alps was glad. Somehow, the gentle rocking motion eased his pain. He was able to glimpse Reika, in a similar stretcher, being carried by Vhale and Lira. Her fur was still brown-splotched all over, filthy with caked blood as she looked far worse off than Alps. Was she really going to be alright? Luna walked sluggishly, and carried herself like she was far older. She was worn out too. Everyone seemed stretched nearly to their limit. Only Vhale seemed to be holding up well, but he was not involved in any of the fighting. The rocking motion took his mind off everyone's suffering for a bit. Ultimately, it lulled him back to sleep.

When he came too, he was being jostled a bit as he was brought through a gate in front of an old-looking house. He opened his eyes and saw black ribbon on the gate itself. That was not a good sign. Someone died. He heard a scream from the house. The thumping of two sets of feet, and the boy squeaked from the impact of apparently both his parents. Alps would wag if he could. He was happy that he made it home. How often does one get to reverse such tragedy? The Letai had been known for that. He was happy to experience it,

even if immobile.

“Vahn! We thought you had perished! Tir said you were brought down by Uruk! He said he saw it!” a male voice, sobbing, said. The black ribbon was apparently for the boy that they just brought back.

“Dad! It’s okay, geeze! Tir ran off like a coward and left me there. There was just two of them. But they got me. They really did. These people saved me. They are running from Jalana. They need a place to stay while their friends get better.” There was a surprised cry from a female, perhaps the mother.

“Asuna? Here? Vahn, go inside! Now!” the male shouted. He tried to protest, but his father loudly reaffirmed the “Now” part of it. Alps was set upon the ground, which made it a little easier to see. Nita and Nidaja stood in the way in their travelling cloaks as the father, a very strong-looking tan-furred wolf squared off with Lyat, which was apparently why Alps was put down. Lyat might not have been in good enough condition for another heavy battle against Uruk, but punching out a farmer would be sleepy work for the still-larger Asuna.

“I would advise you to stay your words of hate and open your heart, kind farmer.” Nita stated.

“I appreciate you all for saving my son, however you managed to do that, but I will not tolerate these spots upon my estate. I would be barred from town if anyone found out. I don’t know what you people did, why you are running, or where you are going, but my advice to you is that you keep on going and stay the hell away from town.” Alps could not hate the wolf for his words. He was very well aware of what the farmer was afraid of.

“No, I mean, you should really reconsider.” Nidaja said sternly. Alps watched as the general and her sister both removed their hoods. Nita held up the royal crest to the farmer. Another loud squeak from his mate, who seemed good at that noise. He lowered his head in a bow.

“I meant no disrespect, Your Majesty, I would never!” Nita moved up closer to him, and took his hand.

“No apology needed, kind sir. But your help *is* needed.” Her words were gentle and professional. He flailed a bit, backing up and indicating the door.

“By all means, Your Highness, please! Please, bring them in, we will help in any way that we can!”

The tension of the moment perhaps wore too much on Alps. He wanted to look around the farm house as they brought him in, but he simply lost consciousness again the moment he was through the threshold. Something

about being inside a house after everything had happened filled him with a sense of safety and peace. Or maybe Luna just knocked him out so that he would not experience the agony of being transferred to a bed. He didn't know.

When light greeted his eyes again, he felt different. He moved slightly. He had control of his muscles again. He turned his head. Reika lay there by his side, clean and sleeping, it seemed. He twitched a bit, thinking of her fearful face as she watched the Uruk dance around taking cuts at her, slowly killing her. It was a horrible thing to see. She was alive though. Would she be okay emotionally? That was terribly traumatic. He sat up and immediately regretted it. He nearly vomited, barely keeping himself together. He laid back down until his head stopped spinning, and then slowly, very carefully sat up again. He felt awful, but he could sit up. He looked at Reika again, who slept peacefully. He was clad in his trousers which appeared to have been cleaned. He lifted the sheets a little, and dropped them back down immediately. If Reika had anything on at all, it was not on her chest. He looked over to the door, then around the room. It was small, lined in grey stone with a wooden ceiling, a small lantern hanging above the window which let in plenty of bright sunlight. The shutters were open, and a soft, cool breeze ruffled Alps' fur.

"Hello?" Alps called out. His voice worked again. For the condition he felt like he was in before, he was actually doing rather well. The door swung open almost immediately. Nita was there. Alps smiled at her and she pulled him into a deep and slow kiss. Alps closed his eyes immediately to enjoy it, even though his side was still very sore. Nita then pulled a cloak onto Alps hastily. At first, he thought he was being taken outside or something, but then realized that he was only being brought into the living area where the farmer and his wife were talking with the others. Nita was hiding Alps' wings. He wondered how any of this was to remain a secret.

"He's awake! Welcome back to the world of the living, you lunatic!" the heavy farmer laughed.

"I am going to take him for some fresh air." Nita stated tenderly. They nodded and the queen escorted Alps outside. The air outside was indeed fresh and it was pleasant. Having come close to death, it was easy to appreciate every little detail of being alive. The tubers were already harvested so the scent of fresh soil was everywhere.

"Is Reika going to be okay?" Alps asked. It was the first thing he wanted to know for sure.

"She will be alright, but it will be at least two more days before she's up and about like you are. She had more injuries. Her brother is holding up alright." Alps sighed in relief. He then perked up. He had not thought that Lyat was that severely hurt.

“Lyat was badly injured?” he asked. He then remembered that he blacked out before the fight was over and felt utterly ashamed.

“No, not really, but who do you think Luna’s drawing essence from for the healing sessions for you and Reika?” the queen asked. Alps went scarlet. He could not help but think of Luna repeatedly pleasuring Lyat. “He and Nidaja both, but they have been very willing, given the task at hand.” He blushed even more as he considered Nidaja’s involvement. Was she tending to Lyat to help with essence drawing, or were she and Luna embraced in intimacy? The former slave nodded, trying not to work himself up dwelling on that. “We can only tell little bits to the farmers. I wanted to fill you in on the story before you went back in there. We were travelling to investigate a strange report, is what we told them. They immediately had a strange report in mind that they thought we were investigating, two things, actually and we rolled with that. Alps, this is not something you are going to like.” The white lupine looked curiously at Nita as she leaned back against the fence.

“What is it?” he asked. He did not like the unhappy expression that she had.

“Alps... There have been two very high profile assassinations while we have been tied up with such intense matters.” Nita seemed so dire and serious. The first thing Alps thought of shot through him like an arrow made of ice. When he thought of assassination, he always thought of what Nita had to be protected from.

“Please not Misty.” He croaked, feeling sick again.

“No, no, not that!” the queen said hastily, “...but both are people you know Alps... Sit down.” Nita helped Alps down against the fence post, to the ground. His heart was already racing with preparation for terrible news... and to mourn.

“Please. I need to know. Just say it.” He huffed with bile collecting in his throat.

“Alps, Azia was assassinated by members of the Spirits of Silverlight.” The words rang like a bell right in Alps’ ears. He did not know her as well as many of his friends, but it pained him severely to hear that. He pulled his knees to his chest, tears in his eyes.

“Tia?” he asked, assuming that was the other. Nita shook her head.

“No one knows where she went, but it’s assumed she somehow escaped. She was obviously not part of the conspiracy.” Alps sighed softly, wiping wetness from his eyes, sniffing a bit. Azia’s role was dangerous. He knew that. She was

changing things in a very rough environment. He wished he could have protected her. The Spirits of Silverlight had apparently gone back to being enemies of the crown. He hoped Tia was okay. He looked up again and tilted his head, his heart already heavy.

“The other?” he asked.

“Chana Feras.” Nita said bluntly. She had very little expression as she said it. Alps knew why. Nita and Nidaja both wanted her dead after finding out what happened to Alps in her care. Alps felt suddenly hollow. He had asked his friends to leave her alone, but it had not changed her fate.

“The town’s been in an uproar. They kicked the Sprits of Silverlight out and there’s been trouble with that, but the group suddenly packed up and left for some reason and things have been calming down, but they are not really patient with strangers right now. The farmer helped us get resupplied without any of us having to go into town, but we have had to keep Reika and Lyat carefully hidden. Hyenas this far north would throw those people into a frenzy and they would burn this place down.” Alps sat up again, a memory hitting him like a landslide.

“Ellis... the fox!” The mention of fire reminded him of that horrible attack she unleashed on the Uruk.

“We didn’t see where she went after the fight. We assume that she’s still around though. We have found dead Uruk the entire way to this farm house. It’s like she was picking off any that escaped the fight, or maybe just stragglers or patrols that were out when the attack occurred. They aren’t just heavily damaged, Alps... They are in pieces. I don’t know what kind of sword she was using, or if she somehow uses essence to improve it or the power of her strokes beyond what even Nidaja is capable of but she hews through Uruk as if they were imaginary to her. She’s dangerous... Luna claims that she’s got at least the essence ability, the raw power... of a high Priestess. We do not know what we are dealing with when Ellis is around, so please be careful when dealing with her Alps. We know she’s been following us but we are not sure why.” Alps nodded to Nita. He’d felt that way for a while. He would be cautious with her. Still, she had never done anything to them directly to make him think she intended him or any of the others harm.

“Where are the others?” Alps asked, thinking of everyone else again suddenly.

“Lyat and Luna are ... taking care of private matters we would rather the good farmer does not see. Lira and Vhale are fishing. They have taken to doing chores to pay the family back for their kindness. Nidaja’s inside. We should be able to leave soon, in a day or maybe two depending on Reika’s condition, but I want you to keep your wings covered. Nothing is said about the Letai, nothing is

said about the Uruk or where we are headed, alright? I just want you to keep your strength up, eat and drink plenty of food and water, and rest so you have your full strength back.”

“So, wait... You want me to spend two days with you, close, warm, safe in bed, eating and drinking and resting?” Alps asked, his tail slowly swaying side to side as he pulled himself up along the fencepost.

“Correct.” Nita stated calmly.

“I think after fighting a hundred Uruk, that’s sounding a little dangerous!” Alps laughed, and kissed his beloved Nita, not caring if the entire world saw that.

Sirius, Book IV

A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 11

The low white clouds seemed to move so much faster because of their closeness to the ground, and illuminated by the moon it gave them an ethereal look. Nidaja rested on her back in the medium length grass, a stalk of it between her teeth, sweetness from it on the tip of her tongue. She sighed as she enjoyed the cool evening air. The opportunity to rest had not been offered easily. Alps and Reika were badly injured, but would recover. Luna assured them all of that. It had been a three day rest, but Nidaja knew this was to be the last night that they stayed here. It was too dangerous for both the mission, and the people who had agreed to give them shelter. They had little trouble keeping visitors away by saying the house was under quarantine due to an illness in the family that would need a week to run its course, but well-wishers would not keep their distance too long once that was over.

Nita needed time to recover from the shock of seeing Alps fall in battle. The queen herself sustained him with what little essence energy she could when he demanded that Reika be taken care of. His mother had just saved the child, Vahn, so she didn't have enough energy to do more than pull the girl back from the brink. Nita could do even less, but she got unexpected help from Lira, who was a marginally capable user of healing essence. Survivalists without the ability to treat a wound don't make it long, she said. Upon getting to the farm house, the routine for two days had been for Lyat and Luna to slip out to the forest near the farm house to let Luna draw energy, which she had done four times. The hyena was willing, but his body was tired.

"Thank you for being so understanding. I am certain this is unusual for you." The white priestess stood ten or so yards away, her simple but elegant green and gold robes easy to recognize even in the darkness of a passing cloud. The general sat up and smiled to Luna. Nidaja wore a simple grey tunic and her leather plated skirt, seeming a bit more relaxed than she should be given their mission. Armor was not needed for the task at hand, however.

"I wish you had asked sooner. I was not aware that was an option, or I would have offered." Nidaja patted the grass at her side. Luna bowed courteously and took a seat.

"I had not been sure that it was not a taboo to you. It is to some. At least,

beyond preference.” Luna explained. The general shook her head softly.

“No, I imagine Alps would not have volunteered that kind of information. I was the only affection Nita allowed herself to know for a long time, so I am both accustomed, and genuinely amiable to the idea.” She reached up and caressed Luna’s cheek, getting a soft blush from her.

“It’s common in a Letai temple shared by multiple priestesses obviously.” The older lady wolf whispered. “It is good to hear that you were there for Nita though. I am sure it’s hard to know who you can trust in her position. She needed that.” The general nodded to Luna as she said that, finding her to be both kind and intelligent. Her wisdom would be a wonderful asset to the royal house if she was willing to stay close. With Alps and Nita bound, Nidaja imagined she would likely stay in Diera. Nidaja murmured softly,

“Actually, it was enough for a while, but she needed more eventually. She needed something different. It’s why I gave her Alps.” The green-furred lady slipped a little closer. Luna was here to draw essence, of course. When Nidaja had realized that the hyena was yielding less essence because his soreness made the encounters less pleasant, she swooped to his aid, but she did not do so begrudgingly. To her, she was being given the opportunity to both help Alps with her own power, and give a very warm impression of gratitude to the one who brought her very best friend into the world. There was no taboo to her. Besides, she had become accustomed to shattering taboos anyway.

“Thank you, Nidaja.” The priestess leaned in and touched her lips to the green-furred lupine’s own. The first touch was electrifying to her. She was so gentle. Her touch, her voice, her long, soft hair, her generous bosom, the way she pushed in closer. Nidaja leaned back a little, putting one hand slightly behind her as she sat on the grass to keep her upright, the other slipping over Luna’s back as the white female kissed her, tongue tracing lips, then caressing tongue, the moment easily slipping into just the kind of passion she had shared with her sister and with Misha and Uri so many times.

“If it were not for you, Alps and Reika and a child we only just met would be slipping farther and farther away from us in the lifestream.” Nidaja explained in a whisper. “I would say this was thanks for that...” Her hand tightened over Luna’s shoulder as she nibbled along her jaw line, “But I am sure you are figuring out that I do not view this as a favor.” Her words became more sultry as she grinned. How would Alps feel about this? Would he blush when he found out? She loved seeing him flustered.

“It brings me a special kind of pleasure to be closer to those who have brought him so much happiness. You are just as responsible for my freedom as Alps is.” Luna’s words gave Nidaja some pause as she tried to follow the logic on that statement. Luna slipped her hands along the general’s sides, and then

drew her tunic up over her head, the lady Emerald Amanian shaking her head slightly, her long ponytail draped over her shoulder as her narrow, sly eyes regarded the beautiful priestess.

“Why do you say that?” she asked, actually a little surprised at just how comfortable this was. She had expected a little awkwardness, at least until the pleasure took over for them both. The general leaned back a bit more, bosom shamelessly presented to the mother of her long-time lover. She enjoyed the feel of a cool breeze teasing over perking, firming nipples.

“His determination to get back to you both was where he got the power to make it out of there. While he may have gotten the ability earlier in his life to get out of the crystal, he would not have tried; he would not have had the will, if it were not for you.” Nidaja considered that a moment. She was right, of course. When she first met Alps he was a very different guy. He could barely look at her in the eyes. Luna continued. “Neither of you treated him like he was a slave. I could tell that immediately. I know he is where he belongs and I have just as much gratitude to share with you as you do.” Her own words became smoldering as Nidaja found herself pushed back to the ground.

She had expected a somewhat utilitarian experience tailored to her direct pleasure for Luna to draw from her quickly to serve Alps and Reika their last session of healing, but that was not what she got. Luna’s kiss was passionate, almost desperate as her thigh pushed between the general’s own, her plated skirt dividing, pushed up and to the side a bit as she felt a bare leg ease up against her with urgency. It felt more like how she took Alps, wanting, feverish with desire. It incensed the Emerald Amanian, her hands pulling at Luna to bring her closer as she popped free for a gasp of air. The moment she did, firm suckling greeted her bosom, a nipple pulled hard and drawn tight against a stroking, rasping pink tongue. Nidaja was immediately soaked with need as her leg pushed back against Luna to try to grind with some insistence between her thighs to return a bit of that anxious pleasure that was already welling in the generals’ tummy.

There was a firm bite at one of those turgid nipples that drew a bark of heat from Nidaja, and she pulled the robes off of the priestess’ shoulders, baring her back, and her chest. She pushed Luna back by her shoulders, and then pulled her up and forward to capture a heavy mammary in a wide muzzle, then suckled with equal severity to what she had been shown on one of those thick nipples. Luna groaned loudly, and shifted her leg again, before drawing it back, and slipping a hand down between Nidaja’s thighs. The audible squish that greeted the mother wolf’s seeking fingers granted her all the permission she seemed to need.

Alps was very efficient at pleasure, and had become even more so because of the time he spent in Nidaja’s body, but there were things that only

came with knowing one's own body for a lifetime. Those were the things that Luna unleashed on the general. Nidaja cried out almost immediately as if tortured by fingertips that drew tight circles around that focused point of pleasure. Knowing the spot is something Alps could do. Knowing the exact rhythm and timing was only just slightly beyond him. It was not beyond Luna. She pushed Nidaja back, her grip strong on the collarbone of the stronger general. The Emerald Amanian could probably easily physically overpower Luna, but the pleasure screaming through her body with each motion of her two fingers upon her wet folds prevented her from doing much other than plaintively squeaking for mercy. Luna had none.

Nidaja found herself spread out on the grass, watching mindlessly at the passing clouds occasionally obscuring the moon, casting hard, long shadows over the fields and trees that surrounded them. The general groaned out as Luna held her down, then moved slowly down her body. When the priestess cupped her mouth on Nidaja's soaking honeypot, she realized that Alps seemed to have inherited a few traits without knowing it. The general immediately seized up at the sheer skill and power of that tongue. Luna did not stop. She pulled Nidaja's hips off the ground, pinning the general to her shoulders as her hips were embraced against the priestess' chest, the Amanian's legs draped over the white lady's shoulders as she released a long rush of groaning from being stoked in a plateau from one release to another.

Nidaja had considered that the idea of the essence drawing was being pleased to peak. It seemed like a very simple idea. Once the peak was reached, the priestess took her time and drew upon all that essence, sometimes even with some visual indication of it. Nidaja could not even see Luna, and it didn't seem like she was slowing down to draw from her. The general did not want her energy to go to waste, but she could not push herself to ask the priestess what she was doing.

The green-furred girl eventually struggled a little as she approached another climax quickly, and it ached inside her. She knew this would be one that Alps had been able to get from time to time. She hoped to be able to return the favor a bit on his mother, but it was looking like Luna had something to prove. Nidaja grabbed handfuls of grass.

"N-no! I can't take it!" she cried. Luna pulled her mouth off the general and panted out,

"I do love hearing that, but I am more aware than my son is of what a girl can take..." She pushed Nidaja's hips down a little, still cradling her lower back to keep her boosted up and pushed three fingers into her, beginning to piston them just as her spongy wet inner flesh squeezed tight. The priestess fluttered her tongue in that perfect sense of timing as her fingers hammered rapidly in and out of her. Muscles clenched, eyes shut tight, Nidaja wailed with agonizing

waves of blinding pleasure. Seven minutes was all it took a Letai Priestess to bring Nidaja from 'interested' to violently splashing her honey all over Luna's bare chest as the wolf relentlessly fluttered her tongue at her.

"Yes! Oh yesss!" cried the pinned green wolf girl, her back arching as her toes spread out. Luna crooned out happily, stopping her tongue to talk a moment.

"Very good, Nidaja. Emerald Amanians have so much essence, and it's just the right color for healing." Nidaja dizzily groaned out, almost sobbing from the force of her release.

"C-color?" the general asked weakly, wanting to keep Luna talking because if her tongue hit her again, it was going to start all over and she could hardly breathe. It was pleasure like she had been shown only rarely and Luna was pushing her into it with the skill of a bricklayer at a wall. Luna continued to stroke Nidaja's sex, going slow and gentle for the moment, which relieved her a bit.

"Letai see the essence very clearly, and sometimes discern color. Different colors of essence lend different strengths. Red essence from passionate warrior types work great for pushing and pulling and forcing the environment. Nita, though she does not realize, gets a lot of that essence from you, Nidaja." The general looked up her pinned body, her hips still up well above her head as she looked into Luna's mismatched beautiful eyes. Slender, skilled fingers continued to evenly push in and out of her tightly quivering sex.

"My essence is red?" she asked.

"Right now it's green, because you have been acting very much in a motherly, caring fashion for Aris and Reika. Normally it's more red." The priestess explained. "Nita gained more skill in fire magic because of your essence. If she drew from me as she learned, she might never have learned to use it at all." The general panted. Luna was being gentle, slow, and left her clit alone but she still felt herself rising.

"Ahhah.. I... I think I understand. So this will... nnnh... This will help Alps?" she asked.

"Aris is almost healed, he needs very little. His own essence reinforces his healing. His mood is all that keeps him in bed." Luna stated. "Until Reika's back up to her usual mischief, he will be a bit gloomy, I think. Reika's the one who is getting this last session, and this should have her smacking people with Bone in no time."

A memory flitted through Nidaja's head as she considered Bone. Ellis had

picked it up and done something unbelievable with it. She seemed to draw energy from it and then spewed the hottest fire the general had ever seen all across the battlefield. She then dispatched Uruk with such ease that she seemed almost bored with their inconvenience. What was she exactly? Why was she following them?

Luna seemed to notice Nidaja's focus slip away, because her mouth sealed suddenly upon the general's sex again, and it took seconds before she arched her body hard and gave up another wave of that precious energy. She had watched Lyat drawn from twice, and the second time even helped pleasure him, but he was not treated quite like the general was being treated. Males often find it unpleasant to be pushed too far beyond peak, but Luna had no shame in milking Nidaja for every climax her conscious mind could provide. The way she did it made it seem that it was not just about the essence though. Luna's smile, her laugh at how the general writhed and sputtered and whimpered, made it apparent that she was enjoying that.

Nidaja groaned finally with relief as Luna let her hips down, and let her rest on the ground, her leather skirt falling back into place. Luna leaned back a little and smiled at Nidaja, her eyes actually faintly glowing from the essence drawing.

"Very good, Nidaja. Thank you. This will be enough. When we get safely away from the prying eyes of a village who actually knows the poor boy, I will take my fill of essence from Aris." The priestess pulled her robes back into place, her clasp loosened from being pulled off of her shoulders. The general pulled her tunic back on, grateful that little else was needed in that moment. As much as she wanted to pleasure Luna too, she no longer had the strength. She marveled at Lyat's ability to do this several times a day with Luna.

"Luna?" the Amanian asked softly.

"Yes, Nidaja?" she replied.

"We will be family soon. I just wanted to tell you that... I would have never thought we would even see a real Letai in our lifetime, and now we look to see you as a mother to us. You will gain a place in the royal house. Will you stay with us?" she asked.

"I will." Luna stated. "Alps and Nita will want me there, I think." She seemed to feel it was a silly question.

"I just want to make sure you know... after all that time you spent in the Shadowfall, you will never be alone again." The general hugged the motherly white wolf tightly.

"I have no intention of being alone." Luna chuckled. "I still intend to have a family of my own, right alongside yours. A new life has started for all of us. Now, we are taking measures to make sure it goes as smoothly as possible."

"Luna..." Nidaja was having trouble getting something off her mind.

"Yes? You seem troubled. Do I have to start over?" The priestess grinned. Nidaja waved her hands desperately at that.

"Oh no! No, I am okay!" she cried. "... I just wondered..." She sat up a bit as Luna stood.

"Wondering is a good habit." Luna smiled to her demurely, but it was hard to seem entirely regal when her face, neck, and chest were soaked with feminine release.

"The fox..." Nidaja inhaled softly. Luna nodded to her.

"Ah yes. Ellis." Luna murmured. "I assumed you might be dwelling on that."

"She's not a Lhap Islander. Fen and Kun, Lunaris' specialists... Those are Lhap. They are short, petite, have adorably oversized ears... Ellis is a different kind of fox. Alps assumed she was Lhap because those are the only foxes we know about, but after what we saw..." Nidaja gritted her teeth.

"You are wondering if she's dangerous." Luna asked wisely. "This is a good thing to ask. I cannot tell you, however. I am not entirely sure of her motives. She does seem rather insistently attached to Aris though, doesn't she?"

"Because he freed her from the Shadowfall?" asked the general.

"No, something more. She seems to be following him. She doesn't need to. She can return to her homeland, wherever that is, but she has not left us. She is a mystery to us both." Nidaja felt a little better that she was worthy even of Luna's curiosity.

"That attack she did over Reika..." Nidaja murmured, not sure exactly how to address it. Luna seemed tense as it was brought up.

"That was very alarming. I had just come over the hill when she did it; I have never in my life seen an attack like that. No essence technique I know of can accomplish it. That was not a natural fire." Luna whispered.

"Then it's something specific to her? Can only Ellis use it, or is it a technique you might be able to do?" Luna frowned at Nidaja's question darkly.

“Even if I could, I may be unwilling. She may have drawn that attack from the Nether. That’s very dangerous. Alps might be able to, as he seems to be able to draw that kind of energy but I would certainly not recommend he try. He appears to have very little refined control of the essence anyway. Nidaja, if you mess up a technique, it may rip your muscles. Can you imagine Alps losing control of a technique like that? Ellis seems to know things about the essence that perhaps we do not. She seems to know a great number of things.” Luna stretched a bit as she thought about that.

“What was she doing in the Shadowfall?” Nidaja asked.

“I put her in there.” A male answer came from a short distance away. Nidaja gasped and sat up, turning to see Vhale standing, dressed in his dark robes, looking glum as usual.

“Taking in the sights, Vhale?” asked Luna. Her tone was surprisingly soft and casual for what she was accusing her once mortal enemy of. Nidaja was surprised how closely she was honoring Alps’ wishes that he be treated with kindness despite what he did to her.

“I kept my safe distance until the cries had ceased.” He seemed unaffected by it. The sudden image of him entangled with Luna flitted through Nidaja’s mind, making the general blush a little. Surely they would never be that close in their possibly forced friendship. Besides, it seemed like Vhale was too deeply entrenched in his self-suffering to allow himself that kind of pleasure.

“How did you manage get someone like that into the Shadowfall?” asked the priestess.

“It was the only way that I could stop her. When I found her, it was only a few weeks after our... meeting... at your temple, Luna.” The black-furred male gave a pained look, as if having an old wound poked. “I did not attack her specifically, we just sort of ... found her on the road as if she was waiting for someone. My Uruk of course attacked, regarding someone with strong essence as Letai, and she proved to be unexpectedly hazardous to the Uruk. I didn’t bother counting my losses from that encounter, there were parts everywhere. I suppose she was not expecting the Shadowfall, since she didn’t get out of the way of my spell. I kept a key she was holding because I intended to find out what she was and it had an inscription on it I could not recognize. I had wanted to trace its origins. As you can imagine I saw her and her kind as a threat. I never had a chance to do that though, as you already know. The one thing I remember is the expression on her face when I cast her in. She just... Waited. It wasn’t like she was doomed; it was like she just didn’t have anything left to do.” Nidaja was not comforted by that. Even Luna shuddered a bit. The general decided to change the subject. There was not much to learn in that discussion.

Still, she was surprised to know that even the Letai knew almost nothing about that enigmatic vulpine.

“What brings you out here, Vhale?” she asked.

“Reika snores. I told her to stop so I could sleep.” He explained, lowering his head so tendrils of his long hair fell over his eyes. The white lady wolf folded her ears back in immediate understanding. Nidaja, too, knew why the black-furred male was likely there.

“Oh. Yes. Yes of course, I can heal you, have a seat.” Luna sighed, smiling at the dark lupine. Nidaja cupped her muzzle to stifle her smile as he let the priestess tend to the bite on his shoulder as he sat sullenly in the grass. Vhale was never happy. He had very little hope. He would be dead weight except for his knowledge of what they were working so hard to do. However, as Luna tended to his shoulder, the general saw that her face was relaxed and happy, she had all the genuine contentment that the general imagined she must have shown Alps’ father over and over again so long ago. Were the Letai so deeply linked to love and tenderness that they could show this kind of care genuinely even to this wretched thing?

Everything was upside down. That was the first thing Alps realized. He looked at his feet, because he was standing on something. It appeared to be the steps of some kind of ruined temple. The walls were hollowed and crumbling and it looked like it had not had a roof in a long time. Above him was what appeared to be a forest, but there was a lake directly beneath him. Somehow it was familiar. There were small chunks of land, grass-covered, or even holding trees drifting under him like clouds. It was almost as if land and sky switched a moment, and it was overcast with land, with patchy land passing under the higher canopy of overcast “sky.” The island of temple he stood on did not seem to want to drop him any time soon.

“Another dream.” Alps stated solidly. “This is a weird one. I should wake up now.” He tried to will himself awake. If he had a disturbing dream and realized he was dreaming, that had always been enough in the past. This time nothing happened.

“You said you didn’t want to see this place. Yet, here you are.” Alps turned and saw the fox who he had just gained a lot deeper respect for. He also somewhat feared her. He had never assumed that she was weak, but he had no idea that she was that powerful. He remembered the blackened scorched ground and glowing sand, the Uruk removed from existence outright. Now, there

she was, seeming demure and quiet and wise as before. Alps was used to extremely strong individuals being anything but shy. Somehow, her gentle and calm demeanor made her even more unnerving with what he now knew. He tried to figure out what she meant, and then gritted his teeth.

“Wait... This is the Nether? I had assumed something more...” He tried to think of how best to describe what he *had* expected.

“More horrifying?” Ellis asked. Alps nodded.

“This is actually rather peaceful, if very odd.” He looked up at the slowly drifting forest and more quickly flowing chunks of various land masses.

“Give me your hand...” Ellis asked. The white wolf did as he was told. The world abruptly blinked out to darkness, and then became a dimly lit cavernous area. Alps felt like he was falling, and his stomach lurched. No wind swept past him though, and he realized that he merely wasn’t standing on anything. He was weightless, but not moving.

“Sensation seem familiar?” Ellis asked. Alps nodded. He peered through the darkness and saw what appeared to be a ledge of some kind, dimly lit in red at the edge. He willed himself toward it the way he moved through the darkness of the Shadowfall. It worked. He had remembered how to do that the time he took the Shadowfall for Nita. Had he learned that technique in this place? In the Nether? The wolf looked behind him. Ellis was drifting behind him, but seemed somehow far more elegant at it, able to change her body posture to seem like her motions were far more intentional and controlled. How did she learn to do this? Or was this all just a dream. He had begun to suspect that the Ellis in his dreams was the real deal, somehow in communication, but she could just as easily have been a label, a face that he attached to his own mysterious memories coming back to him.

“How did you do that fire thing before?” he asked, deciding that he could ask something that there was no way he would know the answer to, and if she did not know or would not answer, it meant that she was only a dream, a figment of his own mind.

“I borrowed the ability from your friend’s weapon. It is part of a creature from this very place, and a very powerful one at that. That girl does not understand what she holds, but he would very gladly give me the power of Whitefire if it meant protecting the girl.” Well, that answered that. There was no way Alps knew that already. Then again, maybe he was making things up on the spot. He found it easier to believe she was real though, even if just for the purpose of knowing where this dream was going, and why he could not just wake up. “He does care for her. I would not be too concerned about his allegiances. He does not side with the Avatar, nor the queen, or even you. His loyalty belongs

to the one who calls to him in the dark and loves him from across the void.” That, at least, was comforting to Alps.

“Why are we here?” Alps asked as he looked at what appeared to be a vast, barren wasteland that ended in a void that he had just drifted across.

“You wanted to see this, for some reason. Maybe as proof you were here?” Ellis asked.

“I don’t need proof. I had already figured out I was here. I just didn’t know why the place we just were looked so pleasant.” He stated.

“The Nether is a very chaotic place. The world is endlessly wrapped in on itself, and reflects every world that is linked to it in some way. The place you just were was the last place you were before slipping free. Do you remember that?” the vixen asked.

“No, I don’t. I don’t remember anything about this place.” He felt it was familiar, but the fox had shown him a similar place before, perhaps in an attempt to get him to remember. If she could make him see these things, he wondered why she did not just tell him about it instead of trying to rely on his mind to call it all back. Alps dived to the rocky ground as fire swept overhead, barely missing his ears. Ellis did not move, and the fire bent around her. Of course it did, he thought. He sat up. “Do you remember anything about it?” he asked. She frowned and the world changed back to the pretty temple that was far less dangerous.

“It would seem that you have not merely forgotten. There is something actively getting in the way.” The fox said. “This is most unfortunate. You will not enjoy breaking through it. I regret what I must do.” Alps felt ice stab through his very being the way she said that, and then he woke up, sitting bolt upright, panting.

“Alps?” came a soft voice beside him. Nita was lying beside him, asleep, but she was not the one who spoke. He looked on the other side of him. The bed was not very large, and it was hard for both he and the queen to fit, but mashed up against the wall in a very small space was Reika, stealing a little of the bed with the wolves.

“Sorry. Weird dream.” He said softly.

“Reika dreams ugly things too. Remembering almost dying.” Alps wilted a bit. She had been very sullen after regaining consciousness and he knew it was because she felt at fault.

“No one’s angry with you, Reika.” Alps stated gingerly.

“Then they is stupid for not being. Reika is deserving fury. Angry. But no one says they is. They lie to Reika.” Alps frowned as he watched her face become more and more pained.

“I am sorry we were not fast enough to stop you.” He rumbled.

“Reika sorry she ees losing control like that.” Her tone was very regretful. Alps had never heard her sound that way. “Reika is being too weak for such important task. Is maybe thinking she is going home.” Another jolt of ice stabbed through Alps. He had not realized that she was suffering quite like that.

“Reika...” He sat up, looking at Nita, and then nodded to the door. “Come with me.” The hyena did not say a thing, she got up, pulling on her robes, making Alps blush as he realized that she had been cuddling with him in his sleep completely bare. He carefully and quietly got fully dressed, needing to put on his cape to hide his wings. Alps picked up her bone club, and they walked together out the back door. Reika still limped, being injured a lot worse than he was. Even with almost hourly tending from Luna, she had been slow to recover from the extent of the damage.

“No trying to talk me out of going. Reika ees dangerous to mission. Ees not able to remember until Uruk almost killing her. Anger ees always like that.” She hugged her chest, seeming near tears. It was painful for Alps to see the girl like this. She hated crying. She hated weakness, and she was close to it.

“Hold Bone.” Alps said authoritatively.

“Reika ees not talked to Bone. Ees ashamed of failing.” She looked away, fearful of meeting Alps’ gaze, it seemed.

“I know you haven’t, or we might not be having this conversation. Hold him, we are going to have a word with him together, alright?” he asked. Reika sighed, and put her hand around the shaft of that bone club above his own. Alps closed his eyes, focusing on that essence heavily. “Close your eyes Reika. I want you to focus on what’s being said.” Immediately Alps felt contact with the entity linked to Bone.

“Reika? Alps? Reika’s there? Talk to Reika.” Bone’s voice was more clear than Alps could remember hearing him before. It was soft, though. He sounded large and powerful, but still so gentle. He spoke well, and the wolf could hear a great deal of care in his voice.

“Reika ees listening.” The hyena said softly, gripping the club a little tight. She sniffed a bit. “Sorry for weak anger and fighting foolish.”

“Reika, that fox who threw me when you were fighting with the wolf, she picked me up again, and she could speak to me like you both can. Who is she? You didn’t tell me about her before.” Alps felt even more sure he had just spoken to the real Ellis after that revelation.

“She said she used your power, ‘Whitefire’.” Alps stated bluntly.

“Yes, she called upon me to help... to save Reika.” He stated. “I had not expected she could do so much.” Knowing for a fact that she could get into his dreams did not make Alps feel better.

“She ees Ellis. Strong fox who better maybe for holding Bone. She ees not weak like Asuna girl. Reika goes home.” There was a pause. Alps had hoped that Bone, who knew Reika best and she trusted the most, might be able to encourage her and curb her self-doubt.

“Why do you feel this way?” Bone asked. Alps did not think that was the best way to ease her conscience. Making her think about it was punishment, not help. The hyena sounded immediately exasperated.

“Friends ees almost dying! They almost die to help and Reika ees not right! Ees bad for important mission!” Alps refused to open his eyes because he knew she was crying now. He remembered what he had been told. If an Asuna sneezes, you don’t acknowledge it because it would be acknowledging weakness. If he saw her crying and tried to comfort her, it would probably get him savagely beaten.

“Are your friends weak, Reika?” asked the voice in the darkness, soft and soothing. Alps had not spoken to him nearly enough to learn just how calm and wise he actually sounded. He felt more and more like Bone was good for Reika, and Ellis had confirmed that, for whatever that was worth.

“No! No, friends ees strong! They ees strongest of all! Reika follows because no one else ees strong and leads like Alps and hees friends!” Her grip tightened on Bone, making it seem like she was throttling him for daring to accuse her of saying her friends were weak. Bone spoke again.

“Alps... Son of a Letai High Priestess... Essence-walker who can pass through the infinite void to the endless realm...” He rattled off a list of accomplishments with such gilding that the white wolf had to think hard about just what all of it meant. “Do you want this girl to travel with you?” Alps balked a bit. This was not the reason he got Bone involved. He merely put it on him to tell Reika what to do. The idea was that she was supposed to learn that she was not weak. No one but her that Alps knew could survive non-essence combat with Uruk that well. Even Alps and her brother would have fallen before taking down more than she did.

He considered what he was being asked. Did he want Reika to travel with him? He lowered his head some in his thought. He wanted Bone to talk to Reika and tell her she was strong, but Alps could have sent Reika home as she asked, and she might have lived a long life instead of risking herself in the dangerous things that were likely ahead. So why did he not do that? He suddenly realized why Bone pushed the conversation in this way. It was to make Alps realize why he asked.

"I do want her to come with us." He said solidly.

"Do you worry that she will fail?" asked Bone.

"I worry that all of us will fail. When we began this journey it was with the knowledge that none of us may return, but it's the best chance we have." He gripped the weapon a little tighter. With his eyes closed, he saw some kind of haze ahead of him. It was a very odd shape. Was he seeing a mental image of Bone? It seemed unlike a person. Four legs, short but powerful, a rather longer neck, and a very long tail made the silhouette. What a strange creature he must have been.

"If you worry that she will fail, why would you want her to go?" asked the creature from the Nether.

"Because I love her." He did not even think about his answer, and bit his tongue the moment he said it. There was an audible squeak from the hyena. It was true. Alps loved easily, and those friends he relied on and he had gotten very close to he loved with a great deal of passion. Reika, for all the damage she had done to him, and the times that she had made mistakes, wanted the same things out of life that Alps did, and she cared for her friends and family just as much as the former slave. She was an ally, and he regarded her and her brother as family. He had even told Lyat that in the heat of battle.

"Reika, why did you go with Alps originally?" Bone was proving to be uncommonly insightful, and Alps vowed silently to speak with him more.

"Reika..." She sniffled, making it obvious she had started crying again. "... ees wanting to be strong for brother... brothers..." she added, making sure that Alps knew she included him. She accepted him. To be regarded as a brother to the strong Asuna was a great compliment. "... ees for strength. Reika gives them strength and ees big help. Ees not wanting to make trouble for them." She shuddered enough that Alps felt the weapon waver.

"You think Alps is strong?" asked Bone again.

"Yus." Whispered the girl.

“Remember what you learned about the Letai, Reika.” The entity in the darkness whispered. “... Remember where they get their strength.”

“From... from their loves. Their friends. Alps get his strength...” She faltered a bit in realization. Alps answered for her.

“... From Reika.” His tone was confident and strong. Suddenly, it felt like every part of the conversation had been designed to end at that very point. It was a revelation that Alps himself had not really been considering until that moment. Bone spoke smoothly, with strength and soothing confidence.

“Luna draws power from her son, who stores it without thinking from every one of his friends who he shares happiness and close company with. Part of the power that Luna used to save your life and that of the boy that you fought to avenge came from you, Reika.” It was a very clear, commanding tone. These points were not meant to be argued. “Hold your temper Reika, we will work together on that, but know that even if you did not raise me in battle, your strength will be used to fight, to heal, and to push that dark ... thing ... back to where he came from.” Alps lost focus on Bone as the wolf suddenly went to the ground, Reika pouncing him.

“Ees sorry! Reika stays! Ees going with you! Never wanting to leave anyway!” she openly sobbed. Alps clutched her close and held still. He did not know if he should console her, because she might still batter him for it, so instead, he kissed her. She kissed back willingly, her tears streaking down his own cheeks. He felt his wings warm under his cape, hidden from view still. He was drawing her essence from her sudden outburst of joy. Even sobbing he could draw uncontrollably from her.

“I will just go back inside.” A soft feminine voice came from the back porch of the house. Alps and Reika looked back up. The wife of the farmer stood in the doorway, holding rubbish that she had been taking out. Alps blushed deeply and murmured,

“It’s personal.” He did not want her to dare attempt to openly judge Reika while she was crying. “Nita will explain.” The woman nodded with a dumbfounded expression and slowly turned around and went inside, visibly blanching.

“Why is so funny about Reika crying? Ees insult Reika?” she asked, her brow furrowing. Alps shook his head vigorously. If the hyena thought she had been insulted, the group would be looking for a new place to stay the night, and they had intended to leave out on good terms in the morning.

“No, Reika. It’s because you were kissing me, I think.” He clarified.

"That's still a pretty stiff taboo." The hyena looked curiously at Alps.

"What ees taboo?" she asked.

"It's kind of like if I were to tell someone they were weak in Asuna culture." Alps explained.

"Taboo is kind of assault then?" Reika asked. Alps gritted his teeth, not having realized that the feelings the Asuna had about that were *that* severe.

"Not so much. Maybe more like... something that gives a negative feeling because it's not understood or is very unpopular." The wolf was not sure what to compare it to for Reika.

"Oh! Ees like bleeding upon feast after battle." She nodded, seeming to think she understood. Alps did not try to correct her. He felt that it was not quite as disgusting as the farmer's wife likely thought kissing a hyena was, but she had not at all been informed why the queen was even travelling with them. She was sworn to secrecy, and given nothing else but enough gold to efficiently forget everything she was seeing during this long few days of their company.

"We go back and sleep, yes? Wulf is not having weak dreams now?" she asked. Alps grinned at Reika's insult. It was good to see her a bit more like her old self.

"It's all loaded up sir. Are you sure that you do not wish for an accompaniment of warships to go with you?" asked the tall brown-furred guard, touching left shoulder with right hand in a salute to Lunaris. Leal stood proudly by his captain who answered authoritatively.

"No, we will manage fine." The Guard nodded to that and departed. Leal then sighed as he looked back to the ship. It looked like a fine vessel, a similar type to Nidaja's own swift-sailed clipper but that was not what had him uncomfortable.

"Could no one else really be found?" he asked. Lunaris chuckled softly.

"No one willing to go the direction we are headed, no." Leal looked up at the captain of the vessel. He was a tan wolf with a black muzzle and long, unreasonably bushy black hair. It could not have naturally been that way. He wore a massive, heavy-looking gold plate necklace over his bare chest, and billowing red silk trousers held up by a white sash. He appeared, in a word, ridiculous. "He stands to earn a rather nice sum, and money's short for him

these days apparently.”

“Kaji Sidali... He has sent more ships to the bottom of the ocean than most life-long sea captains have ever stepped foot on. The guy is out of his mind. Or worse, cursed. We should take one of the warships.” Lunaris nodded to Leal.

“I would feel better about that too, believe me, but those ships need to blockade the port to prevent direct access to the city for the Sons of Sorrow if any accompany those ships full of Uruk they promised. Even if the Uruk arrive unable to function, a large number of then desperate traitors could inflict unacceptable harm upon our city. It’s not the best of circumstances, but it’s what we have.” He nodded to the ship.

“The other merchants are cowards.” Leal huffed, and ascended the gangplank slowly.

“The direction we are going will take us far beyond line of sight to the west, and the western ocean is reported to be home to terrible and dark things unleashed by the dark one to prevent us from fleeing to the lands beyond. Few that go come back, and those who do don’t care to try again.” The guard lowered his head and sighed again.

“And we face that with this floating disaster.” Leal grumbled.

“Are you having second thoughts about accompanying us on this task?” he asked. Leal lifted his head sharply, suddenly at attention.

“Never!” he barked, as if by reflex. He was not going to bow out of a mission after all he had been through. Ceriss and Neit were both going, he would go too. “If you are sure Misty will be fine, I will accompany you. I have gone this far with this incident, I wish to see it through.” Lunaris slapped Leal on the back hard enough to nearly send him off the side of the ship once he got on.

“Misty will be fine, she’s got the rest of the town guard handling things, fully aware and prepared. They were depending on the element of surprise. They’ve lost that. Even if their ships got past the blockade, the city of Diera is not so easily invaded as all that. Arcana Razelle was very tactics-minded and part of the reason this group saw her as a threat was that she made preparations for just such a day. They were too late to prevent those preparations. Trust me; Diera’s biggest threat is being taken by us. Misty and the others have the easy job.” Leal listened to his captain, and then watched as Ceriss and Neit boarded.

“I get why we are bringing Ceriss, she will know when the crystal is far enough away, but why exactly is Neit coming?” he asked.

“Romantic boat ride with big strong guard types.” The girl answered,

blowing a kiss to Leal.

“Uhh...” the grey-furred guard blinked at that. Lunar is laughed heartily. Leal never got a straight answer from her as she headed onto the deck, carrying extra supplies in case getting back turned out to be harder than they hoped. Ceriss, as always, brought almost nothing. The ship was well stocked, so there was not much needed. The ship captain, Kaji, bowed to Ceriss, who was adorned in a cloak that hid even her face, and bowed much lower to the more scantily clad Neit, who wore the expensive outfit that she had ‘forgotten’ to put back in Nita’s room. It seemed to have been part of the payment arrangement for the former thief, since no one bothered to tell her to put it back.

“Quite pleased to be meetin’ ya, Ladies. Welcome aboard the Driftwood.” Kaji said with a flourish.

“That’s an odd name for a ship.” Neit stated.

“Tis a lucky name!” stated the ship’s captain.

“It’s named as such because driftwood don’t sink, ma’am.” Came a chimed in answer from a young-looking lad hoisting the sail.

“Wait, is that a – “ Leal stammered.

“Well I’ll be. It is!” Lunar is barked warmly. The ‘lad’ was not so young after all, he was a Lhap island fox. The sandy-furred male was only about four feet tall, and his ears spanned almost a foot on either side of his head as they splayed out, his petite nose pointed and dainty. His large almond eyes seemed equally exotic. He wore an outfit painfully similar to Kaji’s own, save for the lacking gold chain. He also wore a knife that looked almost like a sword given his small size. The blade seemed more utilitarian than weapon-like.

“Neph! Don’t be disparagin’ my ship!” He hurled a fish at the fox. Leal recoiled at that, not even sure where the damn fish came from. The fox caught it and tossed it over the side. Leal looked down the side of the ship at it. It swam away. The captain threw a live fish at his crewmate for speaking ill of the boat. Leal wanted off. The fox yelled back.

“I ain’t disparagin’! I’m sayin’ it floats! And it always be makin’ it back to land, see! Tis a nice thing I said, so don’t be fishflickin’ my way. I’ll be savin my disparagin’ remarks for you, Captain Reefmaker.” The ship’s captain bolted after the fox, who slipped down below deck. There was shouting, laughing, and dull thumping under the guard’s feet.

“Oh by the stars, he doesn’t even have control of all of his crew.” Leal whispered to Lunar is.

"It's worse than that." Ceriss stated sullenly. "I see no more essence on the boat."

"What's that mean?" Neit asked.

"That mean's this *is* all of Kaji's crew." Lunariss patted Leal on the back.

"You hate me, is that it?" he asked his captain.

"A Lhap islander..." Ceriss said, coming the rest of the way on board as the port attendants pulled away the gangplank. "This will be an interesting diversion indeed." She smiled.

Somehow, having Ceriss smile did calm Leal's nerves a little. He had trouble believing that they would run into hardship that a priestess of her abilities would not be able to handle with ease. He looked at the sails towering rather high over the ship, two masts. Those white sheets of wind-catching fabric would take them far from home for this task, and put the threat of an invasion so far out of Diera's way that such an attempt might never be made again.

For as silly as it was starting out, Leal was feeling very good about the task that he was undertaking. Ceriss moved up behind him.

"There is little to worry about. We will not fail in our task." She seemed to be able to tell he was concerned about how important a duty he was involved in.

"I know, but I always worry about some unforeseen calamity preventing us from this. It's just too important to fail." Leal stated firmly.

"There should be little to worry about. Not many know that the crystal was even compromised, if any at all. Certainly none who stand a chance getting it back. They are likely either in hiding or renouncing their ties to the Sons of Sorrow as we speak, if they know what's good for them." The priestess growled. Leal made note of just how much she hated betrayal again.

"Yeah, but knowing our ability to find trouble, it would not surprise me to suddenly find ourselves boarded by a bunch of them in the night." Leal said. "I just tend to over-think these things. Being overcautious is part of what makes me a guard." The grey wolf slipped an arm reassuringly around Ceriss so that she would not have to dwell on it. So long as he didn't spend all of his time worrying, it might turn out to be a rather pleasant excursion.

"If we are boarded, and there is the slightest chance that they could take the crystal back, I just want you to know..." Ceriss whispered. Leal perked up a bit and looked into her eyes, expecting that she might remind him that he had

done very well and they would fight and win. "... I will tear the bottom of this ship wide open and send us all to the bottom of the ocean. So don't let anyone get onto this ship, okay?" She gave a pleasant smile. Leal's blood ran cold. She was serious. He nodded slowly.

"You have my word." He said in a whisper.

"Hey everyone!" called the ship's captain as the ship started to drift away from port. Leal had not realized that the chase was off and the fox was back on task, having weighed anchor with a level and pulley system that negated his small size to the task. Everyone directed their attention to Kaji.

"What?" called Lunariss.

"Don't forget that tomorrow is naked day. Dress the part!" he cackled. The small fox groaned.

"He's... not serious is he?" whispered Neit close by. Leal inhaled deeply. He hoped that they would at least live to see Diera drift below the horizon!

Sirius, Book IV

A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 12

"It's you!" The lady lupine's startled tone gave Alps a cause for recoil. She backed away slowly. The white wolf was uncertain as to exactly why she seemed so distressed. He recognized the grey-muzzled, brown-furred individual as the woman who ran the mill. She baked wonderful bread every morning when he was growing up in Luca. He always lingered a moment to smell if he was passing her shop. He remembered being fascinated by her waterwheel as a child. Alps stood in her store as he had hundreds of times before, the lantern flickering, pushing back the twilight as he'd barely made it in time before closing. He came here all the time. He remembered being on very good standing in this shop. The owner knew him better than quite a few of the townspeople, so he had no idea why she was being so fearful.

"It is me." Alps replied mellowly. "I don't intend to stay long. I just wanted to get a few supplies." The agreement was that he would indicate that he was travelling alone so that it would raise less alarm. He did not think he would cause a stir just because he visited his own home town.

"Oh, hey... Aheh... that's alright, we can do that. Anything you like, we will get you set right up. You are heading right back out then, yes? Tonight?" There was a heavy sense of concern in the lady's voice. Alps folded back his ears.

"What's wrong? You seem upset." Alps suddenly worried far worse things were happening in this small farming village. He had understood at the farm house that things were harder on the borders, and that the Spirits of Silverlight had been ejected when they turned, but it seemed that a darker presence had taken its place. Chana was dead. Was there concern that more assassinations would occur?

"I don't want any trouble, Alps." The shop-keep whimpered, looking horrified rather suddenly. Alps' heart sank. No one had every spoken to him like this. "Look, I've always been nice to you. We could not do anything about Chana, you know that. You know what she was like as well as any of us." Alps tilted his head at the direction of

conversation. Was it because he was close to the queen now? Were they fearful that he had come to affect some kind of retribution against the people of Luca with his possible influence of the royal family?

"I hold no one responsible for Chana's actions except Chana, and I don't have to worry about her anymore now, do I? I have a new life and a new home." Alps tried to sound positive and hopeful to make it clear that he was not angry with the other people in the town. He was certain most of them knew about his owner's abusive nature even when he was a child, but he also knew that they were, for the most part, fearful of the matriarch. The shop keep gritted her teeth a bit.

"No, no I don't think you have to worry about her anymore." She crossed her arms. "I don't blame you for it you know. If I was given a royal pass to do it, I probably would have done the same after what she did to you all those years." The white lupine backed up a little and narrowed his eyes. What was she talking about? A royal pass?

"I am not sure what you mean." He stated calmly.

"It's okay, Alps. Like I said, most of us don't blame you. It's just... You didn't seem the type, so it's a bit jarring, especially how bad it was. But she didn't have many friends. For a little while, things got better after you had gone, until the new matriarch got here. I'd almost have preferred Chana to that one." Alps had assumed that a new matriarch would have to be assigned after Chana was stripped of her title by Nidaja, and certainly if she had been killed not long after, but he felt badly that it resulted in worse times for the town.

"What is the new matriarch doing? I hate to think that my interference has caused issues here." Alps inhaled deeply, and focused on the essence a moment. Was the shop keeper suffering? Had he caused this? He widened his eyes a little. The mantle of darkness over her was almost as bad as the Asuna. His heart sank.

"If you knew how bad she was, you'd not have come back here, Alps. You've ruined this town. I don't blame you for what you did, but the rest of us did little to you to deserve Enna. Please tell her majesty this? She need not punish us all. Even children suffer under Enna." The last part was whispered. Alps did not recognize that name. He had sat in on many a township report, and was familiar with most of the regional matriarch's names.

"I assure you that Nita had no intention of punishing the entire town for Chana's actions. I will inform Nita when I return home that there is an issue, and it will be resolved." He offered. He felt heavy, sullen, and grim. He did not like causing suffering. The white wolf pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders, the single pauldron gleaming in lantern light. He was aware of how different he looked from when he'd left his home so long ago. He had not assumed that he would be treated so differently, however.

“Do you think... Do you think she would be willing to release the men from the mines?” The tone of the shop keeper was suddenly hopeful, and Alps saw that shroud dissipating.

“Mines?” Alps asked. “What mines?”

“You really don’t know what was done?” asked the worried female. “I... Maybe I should not say more. I’m sorry. Please do not repeat any of this. I have been out of line.” She bowed back a bit.

“What has been done? What mines?” Alps knew for a fact that his beloved would not have forced hardship on the people. Not like that. That fact, paired with the unknown name of the regional matriarch made him feel a sudden sense of dread. Something was seriously wrong.

“Alps, every capable male in town was sent to an excavation to dig up some stupid yellow crystals. It’s to prevent them from being used to make Uruk, they said. “But it’s a prison. They can’t come home, they just dig. I heard two of them died! Alps, things have been terrible here!” She began to weep. The former slave’s heart sank even more. No, Nita would not do that.

“This is not her majesty’s doing.” The former slave growled grimly.

“What?” asked the whimpering shop owner. “Alps, she came in saying she was ordered here under the crown just three days after you killed Chana.”

She might as well have fired an arrow of ice through the suddenly silent Alps. He felt his stomach muscles seize. They thought Alps killed his former mistress? That’s why she was acting so fearful? He would be no part of such an act. Not for revenge. He was clear with Nidaja; she was not to be touched! No, Nidaja would not have betrayed him like that. Besides, the general remained at his side after that meeting with his former owner.

“I didn’t kill Chana.” Alps stated flatly, barely able to hear his own voice.

“What?” inquired the shop’s owner.

“I didn’t kill Chana. I didn’t touch her. She was fine when I left.” The white lupine narrowed his eyes. Someone did kill her though, and he suspected that person to be responsible for the suffering of the town.

“Alps, two people saw you arguing with her the night before she died, unless she had other white-furred former slaves? Like I said, no one here would begrudge you that reprisal, we’re sure she deserved such a treatment. But we only ask for help against what plagues us now.” Alps winced. He was not aware that they had made such a commotion that others saw it, but with how that argument went, he was sure that it

looked like he was responsible. Nidaja, in his form, had come to kill Chana. It might have looked obvious before he intervened.

"I had that argument, yes, but I left her alive and I requested that no harm come to her. She was to live in humility, but not suffer by my hands or theirs. I was very clear about it." The look of confusion on the girl's face was short-lived as the door behind Alps was kicked open. There were two guards there, along with an unusually tall and unhealthily slender black and grey lady wolf in violet robes and a flat-topped wide hat of some sort.

"Enna!" exclaimed the shop keeper.

"Well, well Bree..." said the crackling, aged voice of the other female, "... What interesting company you keep these days. Falling in with common murderers I see." Alps had never even known this shop owner's name, but immediately knew who the other female must be. Bree cried out.

"Enna! I was about to go to the guard as soon as he left, I promise!" That sound of panic in her voice was unmistakable.

"Stow it you stupid wench!" barked Enna. "I heard enough before I made my entrance. Guards, arrest them both. I will have a little talk with our white friend here. You can string up the lying bitch, though." Alps growled in a low tone.

"You would be advised to stand down, Enna." He would not have his important mission halted by this utter side-show. He had grown accustomed to the importance of his duties under the queen and hardly a shadow of his previous uncertain self still remained. He held an air of confidence.

"Or you shall kill more regional matriarchs, I assume?" Enna asked with a sour face. "I think not."

"I didn't kill her and you know it. I think you know who did." Enna strode to Alps and savagely backhanded him. He was so used to Chana doing such things that it simply did not faze him, but with the guards standing there, swords not yet drawn, he did not care to escalate if he didn't have to.

"You would dare accuse me of your own crimes, you worm?" Enna hissed. "I shall have you sent to the mines too. You will wish that you were stung up like your co-conspirator!" Alps kept his head down, having not looked back up from the attack on him. He was thinking. He could possibly escape. Nita coming into town with her sister and the full weight of the crown would solve this pretty easily, but that would reveal that something bigger was going on. He could not afford to get the others involved, but he could not afford to be arrested either. There was no time for that.

"I don't know that the news has gotten this far, but I am the chosen life-mate of

the queen. Do you think she will respond well to my arrest?" There was a genuine expression of surprise on the face of his accuser. The guards exchanged worried glances.

"That is s-such slinkshit you miserable dog!" Enna finally stammered. "It's known that you were bought by the hot-headed general, but that does not put you in the queen's bed. I should cut out your tongue for such a claim." Alps sighed softly. That did not work well. "Arrest them both now. Forget the mines, I want them dead by dawn. Do not grant them any audience." Enna crossed her arms. Bree burst into tears. That certainly was not the better outcome he'd hoped for by trying to temper the woman's response.

"No! No, I didn't do anything wrong, please don't do this!" she cried. Alps grimly turned to the guards. He could not fight them and be sure of his survival, and he could not afford to get killed now. He would try to figure something out, but he'd need time to think. Hopefully he would have enough.

"This is my final warning to you, Enna. Stop now and escape." One of the guards already had his wrists and was binding them behind his back.

"Alps, this is my final warning to you. Shut your mouth, or I will have you knocked out so I don't have to listen to your pompous, delusional madness. You want to at least be awake for the rest of your short life to make peace with yourself for your crimes, right?" she asked. Alps widened his eyes suddenly, a thought shooting through him. There was clear risk to it, but it might be his only chance. He could not let himself be arrested. If they took off his cloak, it could end everything then and there.

"Fine, I'm okay with that, if it means I don't have to gaze upon your rotted fish-for-a-face." Alps looked away, very intentionally exposing the back of his head. He heard two quick steps and tensed up, teeth gritted. Thump.

He felt dazed, his body going limp, but called out loudly into the darkness. Ellis. Ellis could speak to him in his dreams, could she hear him now? Would she be able to hear him and help him and the shop keeper before they had nooses around their neck? There was darkness and silence. He called out again, speaking into the hollow void. He was in trouble. Agents of the dark one had overtaken the town and he was captured. He needed help. He willed what he knew into that void. Suddenly, in the darkness, silver eyes gleamed, narrowed in anger, and were gone. Alps sighed softly. He hoped that he was right. He hoped that this, as in the past, was no dream.

He felt himself being dragged, and his head ached. Alps' eyes fluttered open, and he winced a bit, knowing he had a substantial knot on the back of his head. His cloak was still on, so that part of the gamble at least worked. He was being pulled through the streets. Despite how late in the evening it was, there were people in the street. As his senses came back to him, he figured out why. Enna was shouting as she had Alps and a sobbing Bree dragged through the street. The former slave looked over

to her, feeling terrible for her horrible night. She seemed unharmed thus far at least.

“Look upon them! This is the fate of murderers and traitors in this world! You will wait no longer for justice from the crown. The queen has appointed me to ensure that you are not cut off from the protection of the royal house any longer. This is the reality of that promise I made to you. The Uruk will be stopped, and the criminals will die. Sleep well tonight, my people. This villain will not harm another, and upon the dawn his life will end and ours shall resume!” Alps remained quiet. He didn’t need to be knocked out again, he was pretty sure that he got what he needed out of that. The looks on the faces of people he knew reassured him that not everyone thought he murdered anyone, and those who did think it did not hold him in ill light for it. This matriarch did not hold the faith of the town.

He found himself in a place that Chana threatened him with often. The cold dark cell underneath the small town hall. There was not much of a need for a large jail in such a small town. Their prisoners were usually transferred to Seravi, a larger town. He suspected that most crimes ended at the rope now however, as the cell was empty. He and Bree were both thrown into the same single cell. She threw herself back at the door as it slammed shut, reaching to the guard through the bars.

“No! No! Don’t leave me here with him, he’ll kill me! He thinks I’m at fault for his capture, are you crazy?!” she sobbed. That pained Alps a lot.

“Shut your yap, traitor.” The guard grumbled. “You will be dying in the morning anyway, so it don’t matter anyway. Maybe he will give you the royal treatment if you’re nice to him. The bed’s small, but I bet that don’t matter.” He then left, closing the heavy iron door that lead to the single damp underground room the cell was in. Alps sat heavily on the small cot.

“I’m not dangerous.” Alps stated calmly. He tried to act more confident than he really was to calm Bree.

“Damnit, I was fine! I was just fine and you just walked into my fucking shop and now I’m dead!” she screamed at Alps, hurling a shoe at him. It missed. “I hate you! You ruined everything, you miserable tick!” The queen’s lover sighed softly, not holding to heart what was being said. Bree had every right to be upset and he was the only one around to be upset with.

“I was not lying.” Alps stated. There was a pause from the girl. “When I stated who I was now. I am the queen’s chosen mate. Do you really think this will stand?”

“It doesn’t matter! She won’t even know about this until we are both dead!” Bree sobbed.

“Do you think her majesty would allow her lover to travel to the border territories without the ability to keep him safe?” he asked.

"You were not even armed, you idiot!" barked Bree. "You just let them knock you out!" She cast herself down on the floor on her belly like a child and sobbed, pounding her fist on the cobblestone floor.

"We'll be fine, Bree, quit that." Alps said calmly, even though he was not so sure. He did have one option he could use to get them out of the cell. It would not be the safest route, but there was always the Shadowfall. He preferred not to use that because it would certainly raise suspicion, and it would most certainly traumatize Bree. What was Enna's deal? Was she an agent of the dark one? Was she just a zealous individual like Azia had been, trying to help but terribly misguided? They were mining crystals to keep them away from the Uruk, weren't they? Or was she just mining them to give them to the Asuna in the south for material to build more Uruk? Was this corruption or delusion?

Bree managed to cry herself out over the course of about an hour, and finally sat on the bed beside Alps. The wolf looked sadly over to her. He did feel genuinely bad that she had to go through all of this.

"We'll be dead soon." She stated in a whisper. "So be completely honest. Nothing to lose, no need to hide. You didn't kill her did you? It really was not you?" Alps shook his head softly.

"I did not harm Chana, and my friends were asked not to as well." He knew it was hard to believe if everyone was aware of the argument the night previous to her death. It was hard for Alps to even grasp that she'd died. So much was happening that he had not been able to think about it. She may have been awful to him, but she was still his primary caretaker for almost two-thirds of his life.

"Are you really the queen's lover?" Bree asked.

"I am. And her sister's too, if you'd believe that." Alps shrugged a bit. There was little harm in telling her that. Most in Diera at least seem to already suspect or be quite sure.

"Are you afraid?" Bree asked.

"A little, but not of the same thing you are." Alps answered calmly.

"What do you fear?" Bree asked.

"Someone is on the way here now. She already knows what has happened to me, and her style of diplomacy can be a little... heavy handed." He had seen what Ellis was able to do. Alps worried that she might do great harm to the guards but ultimately too many lives were at stake to handle this event gently. Bree got up and stood by the door. Alps got up with her, both facing out, looking to the iron door beyond the more

cage-like door of their cell, a single room within a room.

“How do you know she’s on her way...? And what will she do against the entire town guard? Even if the queen showed up, I bet Enna could convince the guard she was an imposter and have her arrested.

“The one on her way is not the queen.” Alps stated.

“I hope she comes soon.” Sighed Bree. A few moments passed quietly, before Alps smiled a little, lowering his head as he considered something. Bree noticed right away.

“What’s the smile about?” she asked dryly.

“Here we are both looking at that door hopefully, like she will walk right in and let us out.” Alps looked at Bree who seemed a bit confused and irritated.

“What, is it wrong to hope? It’s all the hope we got, right? Or were you lying?”

“No, it’s just... I don’t usually see her use a door to get in, I usually just turn around and she’s there.” Alps chuckled a bit. Bree turned and yelped, casting herself back against the cage. Alps smiled and spun around slowly. He knew it.

“You got here faster than I thought you would.” He stated. Ellis was there, leaning back against the wall of the cell, her black and silver robes leaving her looking more like a priestess than a fighter. Her silver eyes carefully looked Alps over.

“You are not injured.” She stated calmly. Alps inwardly sighed with relief.

“No, I’m fine. We need to deal with the new matriarch here in Luca. She’s mad, or corrupted, one.” Ellis remained standing as she responded.

“She will be here shortly. We can deal with her then.” Alps cringed at the fox’s words.

“Please don’t tell me you hurt the guards, they were only following orders. She comes across as being some kind of savior sent by the queen. I believe them to be fooled, not corrupted.”

Ellis just stared at him a moment, before she spoke. “The breach of security will lure the target to us.” Ellis took out a small silver flask taking a sip of whatever might be within.

Bree finally squeaked out, “Is ...is that a Lhap islander?” Alps looked back to her. She was stunned. Most people never got to see a fox in their entire life. The white lupine often forgot how unusual his new life would seem to most.

"No." Ellis answered, somewhat coldly. Alps felt a pang of guilt. In all his talking to her, he demanded to know certain things of her, but never asked where she was from. He felt maybe it was because he doubted that he would get a very straight answer.

"How did you get in?" Bree flailed a bit, that part seeming to dawn on her last.

"From outside." answered the fox. Alps rolled his eyes a bit. There, see? That's what he gets. At least it was not just him.

"Oh." stated Bree, seeming satisfied with that answer. The white lupine looked furtively back and forth between them. She was actually okay with just that?

There was a loud thump from upstairs and rapid footsteps. Alps and Bree both turned to the door as it was loudly unlocked and shoved open. The same two guards that had arrested them were back, the furious-looking Enna right behind them.

"What?!" she exclaimed, "They are still here! Was someone here?!" she demanded of Alps. Bree turned around to look at the fox, but Alps knew better. She would not be there. For what was to follow, she would certainly not need to be in the cell. Bree gasped and turned again.

"Did something happen outside?" Alps asked grimly. "Perhaps now would be a good time to rethink things?" He was worried still that the guards had been harmed.

"I swear, if you find your subordinates were just drunk, I will have you strung up right along with these two!" she barked angrily at the guard who had arrested Alps.

"They would not!" he barked defensively in return. "They were knocked out!"

"By who?!" shouted Enna, glaring at Alps. Bree looked back at the cell incredulously again. Alps knew what was going on in her head. Was she imagining the fox? Was the nearness to her death driving her insane? As she reviewed the now empty cell, she missed getting to see that same vulpine stride silently through the open door and place a hand firmly on the shoulder of both guards. The flinch that Alps saw from them indicated that it was an awfully heavy touch. It was just that the force did not seem to require much effort from Ellis.

"By me." The fox's calm voice uttered darkly, making the matriarch spin on her heel to face their guest. She turned in time to see both her guards drop to their knees, eyes closed as they slumped over onto their sides behind her, unconscious. Ellis stood in the doorway, her robes elegant and unsullied. She was vulpine perfection there before an adversary, calm, quiet. Deadly.

"A fox?!" cried the matriarch. "Why are you here?! You come to aid a murderer!"

An assassin!" The graying lady wolf pointed accusingly at Alps. "Let justice run its course or the darkness shall surely triumph!"

"What of the crystals from the mine? Are they following the path of justice?" Ellis asked. Alps widened his eyes. She had truly seen his mind when he called out for her. She knew everything in that brief exchange.

"Destroyed by the thousands to protect the Amani nation." Enna growled furiously. "No business of yours, you should go back to your island."

"How do you destroy them?" asked the fox.

"I give them to the Sprits of Silverlight. They see to their disposal in a lake of fire to the south. This is the will of the queen." Enna seemed very sure of herself. Perhaps she really was misguided. Ellis seemed to gaze right through her.

"How did she get out?" Bree whispered to Alps.

"From inside." Alps whispered back.

"Oh..." The answer seemed uncertain. Alps felt a little prickle inside him. She answered the way she did because the answer was complicated and she did not care to waste the time trying to explain. It was not important enough that others fully understood. He actually began to understand to a degree her often infuriating vague demeanor. The dark-furred vulpine disagreed with Enna on the fate of the crystals.

The fox approached slowly, Enna slipped back, until her back was against the cage. Ellis spoke in a cold, distant tone. "You. are. lying."

"How dare you! My authority here is second only to the royal house! You will not accuse me this way!" she shouted.

"You were not appointed to this position by the queen." Ellis had no waver in her voice. It was not supposition. It was a fact. She knew.

"You are not even Amanian, so you can't be charged with treason for your words, but you can be strung up for subversion." Enna looked fearfully down at her guards. Why would they not get up?

"You were appointed to this position by the Spirits of Silverlight... or whatever they are now." The black fox held up a small, folded sheet of paper. There was a broken red seal on it where it had been folded.

"Where did you get that?!" Enna fairly shrieked. Alps gritted his teeth. Ellis worked fast. She had gotten evidence already?

"You would certainly not want someone sneaking into your office and finding it, so you have carried it on you." Ellis stated. The former slave widened his eyes. She had pulled it right off of Enna at some point, but when? Her abilities to move in silence and come and go made Alps wonder for a moment why she had even refined such skill. What had she done before she was Shadowfallen?

"Well, no matter. I will deny it anyway. Take your friends and leave if you want. It won't change anything here. The queen has lost her control of these border lands. It's only a matter of time before that becomes completely apparent. This place needs order. It matters not who brings it. The war is lost, we just need to survive." Alps gripped the bars of the cell, shaking with anger.

"Just need to survive, huh? Like the Asuna? Enslaved? Our first born always sent to the mines to dig for crystals?" It slammed into place all at once inside him. Everything made complete sense now. Whoever this group was, they were trying to make a deal to survive just as the Asuna had been forced to do.

"You have no room to speak! You are nothing but a thug with noble blood on his hands!" cried Enna. "You belong at the end of a rope, and nothing you say or do will change that."

"I didn't kill Chana!" Alps barked again, starting to get really irritated at that accusation. Why didn't Ellis just knock out the matriarch and let him out already? They didn't have time to fool around there.

"Then who did?!" cried Enna in clear disbelief.

"I did." Ellis spoke darkly and it drove like a spike through Alps. Ellis killed Chana? Was she telling the truth? Would she really do such a thing?

"You... Why?" the illegitimate matriarch turned and gasped as the fox moved up right against her, leaning in and speaking softly into her ear. She looked past Enna toward Alps, who could hear what she was saying.

"I ended her life because she was selfish, cruel, mad with power, and unable to ever change her ways. There was no redemption for Chana. I killed Matriarch Feras for the same reason that I have killed you." Alps heart skipped a beat. Was Ellis truly about to murder Enna right in front of him?

"You haven't killed me, and I am *not* afraid." The words were growled from Enna with confidence.

"Your lack of fear is due to ignorance. You have become a master of deluding yourself." Ellis continued to speak into the older female's ear, keeping her pinned against the cage. "You spent the past few months truly believing that you were saving your people while instead you damn them. It's no wonder that you cannot allow yourself

to believe the truth that you are dying. At least your final words were more inspired than those of your predecessor.” Alps jerked a bit as Bree cried out sharply and jumped back. He looked to her, saw she was looking down at his feet, and he looked down as well.

Alps stumbled back a little as well. There was a pool of blood growing at the illegitimate matriarch’s feet. The white wolf tried not to hyperventilate as disbelief crashed through him. The realization was finally there that Ellis was capable of doing whatever she felt necessary no matter the consequences to those actions. She was truly and genuinely dangerous. Enna slowly slid down the bars and Alps caught the metallic glint of steel as the fox wiped it clean on the matriarch's own clothes as she came to rest, seated in that slowly spreading pool of dark red. She did not move. Just like that, she was dead. By the essence, Ellis actually mortally wounded the woman! When? Enna never made a sound of pain! Alps looked up fearfully at fox. She killed her. And she killed Chana. Why did she kill Chana? The white lupine felt rage build up in him, and fought to contain it. His friends and allies would *not* just go around murdering people!

“You know, we could have let the town deal with her treachery.” Alps watched Ellis unlock the cell door with a key she’d taken off of Enna. When? “You could have just taken the key. You didn't need to kill her.”

“A single message from her to the people who sent her would have doomed this town.” Ellis stated. Bree looked up and nodded to the fox.

“No, it’s true, Alps. If she was not sent by the Queen, it’s hard to say who is really with her and who was just fooled.” Bree stepped out and looked down at the quiet corpse. “Did it hurt?” she asked.

Ellis did not answer, walking toward the door. Alps boiled with quiet rage. He told his friends not to touch Chana. Ellis knew that. She had to. She was always watching.

“The proof...” Bree asked softly. Ellis handed it to her. It was the folded note with a seal on it. Alps did not recognize it as a Silverlight seal.

“So she was illegitimate. That at least will overturn her policies and get our friends and family home... but what if they just replace her with someone else? How long should it take for the queen to put someone else in place?” Alps was not looking at Bree as she spoke. He continued to glare at the quiet Ellis.

“Whoever the highest ranking individual was before Chana’s... demise...” Alps spoke that word with disgust. “... That person needs to take charge. Do not replace them with anyone else unless they produce documentation signed by both the queen and Misty, the head of the high council.” Alps turned away.

“Do you know where the crystals have been gathered?” Ellis asked. Alps faltered

a little. That was an important question. He was letting his surging anger cloud him a little. Ellis pointed up the stairway, waiting for them to go.

"They are on a river boat owned by the Spirits of Silverlight." Bree answered, the black and tan female seeming a little out of breath as she followed Alps through the quiet, vacant town hall, the tables and chairs all in their respective place as if a terrible thing had not just happened in this place. They left through the heavy double doors of the building outside onto the street. There were people gathered there already. They were tending to the first set of guards. There was a pause. Bree spoke again, clearly for those around her. She was not going to just get immediately arrested again.

"Regional Matriarch Mara Enna was not placed by her majesty. I have proof here. Our blood and sweat have been squandered!" She held up the paper.

"Girl, give that to me, let me see!" barked a much older female, bent over and graying, her silvery gray fur a slight mess given that she had likely been awakened by the growing commotion of Alps' arrest and the apparent jailbreak. Alps recognized her immediately.

"Councilor Barr." he said reverently. She had been in Luca all her life. She was certainly not a plant. She often was the deciding voice on disputes in the town when Chana was not able to deal with them because of personal interests in the matters. She was perfect for that task. The letter was reviewed.

"This is not an order by her majesty. It's entirely the wrong narrative. What have we done?" asked the lady woefully. "Alps, why have you returned? To correct your mess? When I heard you were in the clink I came to ask that Enna reconsider your punishment. She should know better than to issue a death sentence without consulting the council. That's not how we do that sort of thing. We know full well what was done to you by Feras, there should have been some leniency." She glared at him, however. He felt a renewed fury toward Ellis. How could she put him in this position? She knew he would be held partly responsible if something were to happen to her.

"I did not kill her." Alps stated.

"She did." Bree pointed behind her where the fox had been standing. Alps didn't even turn to see, he knew she wouldn't be there. "Where did she go?"

"Just know that I did not do it. Chana was her own undoing. You need to deal with other problems." Barr nodded to that, the older lady turning to a few of those gathered.

"Assemble the guard; get everyone out of that mine. I will take care of the arrest of Enna." Alps felt another stab of rage.

"That won't be necessary." He stated coldly.

"She's dead." Bree announced. "Downstairs." There was a gasp of shock and all eyes were on Alps again. Of course. Now murdering regional matriarchs was assumed to be a hobby of his. It was this thing that he did if he happened to be visiting his home town. He shook his head. "Oh. No, he didn't do it." Bree flailed a bit, trying valiantly to correct them. "It was someone else. She's gone now though." Bree sounded puzzled about that last part.

"Uh huh." Barr was justifiably skeptical. Alps would not be inclined to believe that either. The skepticism in the murmuring of the gathering townsfolk was clearly audible.

"He did not." A calm voice cut through the murmuring smoothly from behind him and he turned, as shocked as the other townsfolk to see the black fox emerge from the doorway of the town hall, dragging the body of Matriarch Enna behind her by the collar of her clothes. She stepped in front of Alps, dropping the body before her and the very knife used to end her on top of her chest. A trail of blood marked their path back into the building.

"Look upon her." the fox stated calmly. "This is the fate of traitors and murderers in this world." The white wolf couldn't stand it any longer. He lashed out at her.

"*You* are a murderer! You cannot simply kill anyone you want because you think it's an easier solution! You can't ...!"

The black and silver vulpine silenced Alps with the back of her hand to his temple. It seemed like such a light and easy stroke, but he nearly blacked out from the nearly silent impact. She then grabbed the white wolf by the clasp of his cloak, shaking him back to his senses.

"Incorrect." She stated simply. "And that aside, consider the ramifications of letting her live. Of letting Faras live... She would have done this very same thing to your town." Those gathered gasped, taking a fearful step back. Alps looked at Ellis with wide eyes. She had just claimed those murders publicly. The implication in how she answered was chilling. He felt anger boiling up inside of him again, threatening to bubble over.

"You can't ..." he clenched his teeth. "You can't ...!" She gave him another hard shake.

"This may surprise you, Aris, but your precious queen kills. Her sister, your beloved general, kills – she does so en masse when she has to, by means of an army. This land is embroiled in a war that it is in danger of losing unless the people do what they have to do. Even your mother would kill, if she had to."

"I am fighting for a world with *less* killing, Ellis!" Alps barked, feeling light-headed from the shaking. The fox let him stand on his own again and pointed an accusatory

finger at him.

"You have all the tools necessary to fight, yet you refuse to use them." There was that look in her eyes again, that anger that he'd so briefly seen in the darkness before he was knocked unconscious earlier. "Tell me then, when was the last time pacifism won a war?"

She turned then to leave, looking over her shoulder for a moment. "What if she hadn't wanted to make your execution a spectacle?" she asked coldly before heading back into the darkness of the town hall.

Alps didn't know what to say. He stood there in stunned silence, listening to the unsure murmuring of the gathered townsfolk. It took him several moments to collect himself.

He felt Bree tug on his sleeve softly. "Alps ... who the hell *is* that ...?" Alps did not answer. He felt that he knew, but at the same time, had no clue. He could not answer Bree honestly. He finally spoke.

"I ...I am going to go deal with the Silverlight. They are no longer allies of the Royal House, and I can't just leave them to their devices here." He knew he was not going to be going alone, but this was his adopted hometown. He grew up in the forests and fields around there; he would not see it ruined by Azia's murderers. He pulled his cloak a little tighter to himself, still feeling so different from the person who left not so terribly long ago.

"Alps..." Barr spoke softly. The white slave turned back to her, expecting that she would demand he not go until an investigation was done. That was Barr's way. She would likely be the rightful Regional Matriarch until a new one could be appointed. She looked at the young lupine a little longer and then murmured, "Sometimes these things are necessary. Don't falter. We need you." Alps widened his eyes a bit. A vote of confidence from "By the Book" Barr?

"I never killed anyone." Alps stated flatly.

"The town will be fine. Go." Barr pointed to the river.

"I have something I must get before I handle them. Hold things together here. Empty that mine." Alps turned and headed back toward the forest. These were ill tidings that he was bringing back to Nita. Would she agree to help the town? Surely she would. Those crystals could not be used to make more Uruk. Alps heard a soft murmur from the crowd, and recognized it as a child's voice.

"Did he help us?" There was an answer, an adult, though Alps didn't know if it was his mother.

"I don't know, Rai. I think he's trying." Alps' heart lifted a little. He was trying. That he was. He purposefully strode toward the forest as Barr started giving blunt orders to those gathered.

Leal closed the book and leaned back as Ceriss padded into the small cabin where they had assigned themselves for the journey. They were well off shore, almost beyond the view of the shore. Sailing west was done cautiously because the ocean currents could be stronger than the wind at times, and it was easy to be sent far off course. As a pre-correction, Kaji had sailed almost a half a day north so that their return trip would not miss Diera entirely due to the loop current. The lanterns flickered cozily as she slipped willfully forward and took her place on the lupine guard's lap. He was adorned in the red and yellow shirt that he wore under his chainmail hauberk, the metal garment folded on the floor, and his dark trousers. The priestess, however, wore nothing at all. It was obvious what was on her mind.

"Finally, a little bit of time to focus on something other than danger, assassins and battle." She smiled to Leal warmly. The black and grey male placed a hand on Ceriss' shoulder. She closed her eyes and just let her darkness whisk away like wind had pulled it from her. Her pristine white fur gleamed, leaving her nude there on his lap.

"I want to talk about something. Something that troubled me... has for a little while now." Leal spoke, his voice heavy with concern. Ceriss answered dolefully.

"I'm not used to those I like being close to actually interrupting snuggling for serious talk." She laughed lightly. She was such a different creature from the night in the courtyard of Nita's summer home.

"Letai pull their strength, their energy from the acts of pleasure, happiness, joy and the like." Leal clarified, gazing at Ceriss' energy as it crackled around her brightly.

"This is basic, yes." She responded, undoing the clasps that held Leal's cloak on.

"As a priestess, I thought that you were not allowed to commit dark acts." He let his hands rest on her hips. He was not stopping her, but he had to deal with this. It was troubling him too much.

"This is also true, and very basic." The priestess spoke softly, leaning in to kiss Leal's lips softly, perhaps trying to distract from the subject.

"Don't you feel that the act of obliterating a spirit entirely, not letting it return to the life stream... might be seen as just a little bit dark?" Ceriss paused a bit, looking forward, emptily at the wall. Leal held his breath. He knew that would likely not produce a positive response from her, but didn't know how much it would bother her.

"Yes, one might see it that way. That is how it is, Leal. We are in a war. Dark times are upon us, and when one side can do no harm, the other side is free to do all the harming. Do you think ill of me for what you saw?" She leaned down, darkness sweeping over her body again. "Do you see me as a monster now?" Her voice echoed unnaturally.

"No, I do not see a monster." Leal said calmly, hand sweeping the long tendrils of hair out from in front of his lover's eyes. "I see a priestess who has been wounded in the worst possible way by the dark one." Those eyes narrowed.

"Wounded? You think I am broken, Leal?" she asked, her voice rising in anger.

"Wounded and dying." He clarified, his own tone becoming heavier.

"Do not pretend that you understand me on that level, Leal!" she barked angrily. "You did not go through what I did! You did not watch everyone you ever loved either cast into eternal suffering or slaughtered outright. You were not the last person in your family, knowing that there could never be another. You didn't spend 700 years reliving every one of your worst memories in different ways, aware that it wasn't real, but powerless to stop the constant reminder that the suffering you are being forced to relive was still real. Don't feel sorry for *me* Leal, my dark days are over, but don't act like I am dark in comparison. I'm not. I am doing what I have to in order to make sure that this ends. It's not pretty, and I am not proud of it, but if we are to face that darkness, we have to be willing to harm it. The Letai power of healing will not end this thing." Leal folded his ears back a bit, not in bitterness, but in thought. He whispered again.

"You taught me to see the essence, Ceriss. So I want you to answer something for me. Answer it honestly." The priestess tightened her hand on Leal's shoulder, but nodded.

"Removing a spirit from the life stream... destroying that essence..." the guard sat up a bit. "You have to do something pretty horrible to make that happen, don't you?" The priestess hung her head a little, lips drawn back in a grimace.

"I don't need you judging me, Leal. You don't know the kind of betrayal the Letai have endured." Leal placed his hand over Ceriss' hand on his shoulder as she rested with her hips in his lap. The guard spoke softly.

"I am not judging you. I am not sorry for you. I am afraid for you. You are tearing part of your own essence away... I saw it leave with the assassin that you removed. Ceriss, I don't have to be well versed in Essence Training to know what happens if you start hacking away at your own life. You learned to change your appearance because you knew that over time..." Ceriss let the darkness fall away abruptly. Leal did not flinch. He expected it.

She was the same white lady wolf, but she looked different. Both of her ears were missing wedge-like chunks, as if hacked with a sword several times on both sides. One of her eyes was closed, presumably gone as well. Her hair was kept long as it was just to hide the damage to her ears if she were seen in her regular form, but there was little to mistake the fact that she was losing a lot of her fur. She looked as if she had been poisoned.

"I had not assumed you had learned to see with so much clarity. I should have known. I did teach you myself, after all." She whispered. The priestess sounded utterly defeated. It was apparent that she knew very well what she was doing, and what it cost.

"I was not aware of how much damage, but I could see it happen. I wasn't sure, but I guess now I am. You can't do this to yourself." Leal stated with a tone of anguish.

"The Letai spent too long not doing what needed to be done. Extreme steps should have been taken early on, Leal. I do what I can because I must, even if it does this." Leal slipped his arms around Ceriss and pulled her to his chest. He felt the naked patches under his fingertips and just pulled her tighter to him. Ceriss trembled a little, and then choked back a sob.

"The war will end, Ceriss. You have to believe that it will. You sacrifice too much. This is why you didn't want to go with the others, isn't it? You knew Luna would eventually be able to tell. When she sharpened her senses for battle, she would see it." The priestess cried quietly for a bit.

"How can you still want to hold me knowing what I do? How I am?" she asked.

"I love you, Ceriss." He answered this flatly. He had a lot of love for her, and knowing that she was doing such a terrible thing to herself and to others in the name of protecting was more than he was willing to overlook. Her appearance changed again, to the pretty white wolf that she was meant to be.

"I don't love me. I don't know how you could either. But I won't refuse your love, Leal. I need it. You don't understand." She trembled a little.

"I do understand. Without regular essence drawing..." He looked at her sadly, and she nodded, tears still rolling down her cheeks.

"I'll die. But I look at you, and I know I can tell you that, because even if that were not the case, you are still willing." She whispers.

"How long do you have?" asked Leal in a distant tone. The more she said, the more he understood. He had only learned a little about essence and drawing, but he knew how closely linked essence and life actually were.

"A year or two, maybe? I don't know exactly. I wanted to just spend it with friends. No more fighting, no more strife. I knew the dark one was still out there, but I was safe there in Diera. I thought I was. My last little bit of time to enjoy. No one had to know a thing until my passing. But when the darkness found me there in Diera... in my safe place where I intended to slip away quietly in the night... I just..." Leal clutched Ceriss again. The assassin's punishment had been so violent and cruel because of what he represented, not because of what he did. Ceriss was, in that moment, utterly insane with rage over her last days tainted with war. Leal understood.

"This little bit of time you have left, so long as you are at my side... I do not want you to fight unless it's absolutely necessary. Once this crystal is at the bottom of the ocean, we will go back, and you will have that rest you need. And all the essence I can give you." He whispered. Ceriss just fell against him and sobbed. Leal let her. He held her against him, and held her tight. She needed this. She could not ask for it herself, it had to be offered. She could finally stop. Her pain and suffering were not over after all she had done to herself, but she would commit no more darkness in this world.

The lady lupine smiled warmly, her eyes warm with affection. Leal peered back up at her. It was not just affection, no. There was genuine love and adoration in them. The moment was sealed with a deep and ardent kiss, the guard pushed tighter into the not-so-soft cot in their small cabin. His tongue responded to hers, their moment together sliding easily from that anxious, mournful and melancholy confession, to something beyond what even Ceriss had likely come for. Leal clutched the damaged, but still loving priestess tightly, not letting her move an inch away from him. She needed this. She needed to have that admission of love and devotion reaffirmed, outlined in gold from her lover.

The next few moments were an emotionally charged flurry of moving hands, pulling clothing, and twitching and writhing and kissing on a cot too small for two, but more than enough for two who wished to be joined as one. This was not about essence drawing, and Leal knew it. Ceriss wanted to make love. And he was more than happy to allow her to. He took a moment to appreciate how bizarre his life had become, and how different things were since he had become a guard in Diera. Ceriss, still straddling Leal's lap, shifted her appearance quietly, making herself appear like the thief they now travelled with.

"Oh by the stars, quit teasing!" Leal laughed, the wolf priestess changing back with a smirk.

"At least it's not the queen this time." She chuckled. "So maybe..." She shifted her appearance to that of the general. Leal squeaked in surprise, as she did this just as her hand slipped around his rightfully swollen organ, stroking him lustfully up and down.

"Hey, stay out of the chain of command!" he playfully complained, and then groaned softly as "Nidaja" slipped him right inside her tightly squeezing depths. The shifting female bounced a few good heavy times upon Leal, her ponytail bouncing

appropriately as if it was really bound behind her head like Nidaja's. She had great internal muscle control which she was quick to use to his pleasure. He sighed with relief as she switched back to her normal dark form. The shadowy look was the one he got to know first, so she seemed to know that he liked it. Leal clutched her and let her grind closer into his lap. He tilted his head back as the cot creaked softly.

"Better?" she asked in her own soft and soothing tone. Leal bit her shoulder, making her gasp out as he pushed his cock in deep and twitched hard inside her. By all rights he should have been getting used to this treatment, but it was still so hot and lusty every time he shared himself with one of his new friends. He was not warned before coming to Diera that this sort of thing might happen to him, but he was glad he was not warned. He might have passed up the opportunity because he thought the person was lying to trick him into a far more unforgiving situation. Ceriss leaned forward into the bite from her lover, and bit him as well, hips undulating hard and purposefully, the motions perhaps slightly exaggerated as she shook the wolf under her a little with her needful rutting. Leal folded his ears back, swept up with the passion as the ship they were on bounced a little harder suddenly. A slightly higher wave was likely responsible, but it only cast the priestess a little harder against him.

"Faster... If a storm's coming, I won't be interrupted..." Ceriss growled. "I want all of it in me... please..." She gripped his shoulders tighter and lurched almost furiously upon the guard. Leal closed his eyes, not having to fantasize to speed up his release, he just had to let himself go, let himself enjoy that slick tunnel suckling and stroking him inside his lover. The ship pitched again, making it seem to Leal that a storm might have been approaching. They would definitely not be doing this if they were having to ride out a storm.

"Yes love... I want you to. I want you to have every drop." She shook him a little harder at that. He tightened and loosened the muscles in his leg, pushing up into Ceriss as she bore down upon him harder. The creaking and protest of the cot was louder, but a slight rush of wind from outside made them comfortable in the fact that they were not being heard. Leal grunted softly, letting himself slip closer. The ship listed again, and he held Ceriss upon him as she held herself to the cot.

"Are you close?" she asked, ears pinned back, grim determination. She needed his release, not for the energy, but because he was making her so happy. That dark fur was only a disguise now, there was very little actual darkness left around Leal's eager lover. The grey-toned wolf pushed up tighter and more insistently into Ceriss' clutching depths.

"Yes! Getting closer... yes love, please! Make me cum!" he whimpered, letting Ceriss take the enjoyment of causing his pleasure. She seemed to take that idea very happily and run with it. She ground over him, stirring his ridged shaft against her slick inner walls. She slowed to a crawl, however.

"Good, Leal. Very good. Let's let nature handle the rest..." The ship slammed

down at the base of a wave, shaking the wolves together. Leal winced. The motion of the boat was being used for his pleasure now. Also being used were long, slow contractions of those well trained inner muscles of his lover. Leal's head was swimming with pleasure. It was hard to tell sometimes that it was the boat that was moving, and not just the way he felt while being taken by his skilled and beautiful dark lover.

"Gonna cum..." he whimpered softly.

"Yes... please..." Ceriss held still, only her inner muscles working that thick cock wedged wetly inside her claiming depths. Leal curled upward slightly, knees shaking, then his legs relaxed and spread as he felt pleasure rush violently through him, the boat listing harder to the side.

"Nnnnguuuhhh!" he groaned out heavily. Ceriss cried out happily, then leaned back, letting Leal watch where they were joined, so lewd and wet, and she began strumming her clit with her fingertips. Leal got to watch in rapt attention, not used to seeing a lady pleasure herself, but as his cock jerked and spasmed inside her, she let herself focus on her own pleasure. The guard moved his hand over hers and he gave gentle insistence to take over her pleasure. She arched back, the boat making her nearly fall off as Leal rolled his thighs under her, working his cock inside those squeezing muscles.

"Oh yes! Good Leal. You are so.. nnnmhn!" her body went tight finally. She came easily, though not very heavily. Leal was not satisfied with that. He fluttered her clit with a claw tip and throbbed hard inside her, spilling the last drop of pearly cum inside her suckling depths as she gave a lilting cry of peaking joy, pushed up to another level of her release by the wolf's persistence. The entire time her body lit up like this he felt her sex clutch and convulse around his jerking member.

"Good girl, Ceriss, let it all out, you've earned this..." he growled, reminding her that he liked her and wanted her pleasure.

"Don't stop! Don't stop! I'm gonna..." She was plateauing and the lupine male knew it. He relished this simple torture of pleasure upon her, and drove her to one climax after another, her body lurching with each one. His oversensitivity waned, and the guard began enjoying the chance to use his cock as a nice implement of pleasure for his priestess. She seized again, crying out just as a loud pop was heard and both wolves were dumped in a painful jumble on the cabin floor. Ceriss laughed, unhurt. Leal was a little more battered, but nothing he could not shake off.

"We have discovered the structural limit to our bed already, it's not even been a full day." Leal chuckled.

"It's alright, I will just fuck you standing up then." Ceriss growled, being a little more vulgar than needed, but making her point. She was going to enjoy every minute that she got to spend with the wolf who knew the real her and loved her anyway. There

was no replacement for that kind of comfort and she would take full advantage of it. Leal felt better just knowing that he would be that person for Ceriss. He felt that this might, in the long run, make all the pain she felt worth it. She made it through those dark days; it was time for her to see better ones. The boat rocked and shook from time to time as they lay in a wet heap on the floor for a moment, kissing and cuddling before there was a loud rapping on the door of their cabin.

“I knew that was coming.” Leal panted out. “...Probably here to tell us to secure everything and get ready to ride it out.” Ceriss laughed a bit at that.

“I think we are pretty secure right here.” She grinned.

“Ceriss! Leal! We have trouble. Get up on deck!” It was Neit who was speaking. Ceriss sat bolt upright, her eyes glowing.

“What’s wrong?” Leal called out.

“It’s not a regular storm!” Neit barked.

“It’s the crystal!” Ceriss barked. “Fuck! Leal, move! I should have known they would have an essence release command in it! I’m so foolish!” Ceriss did not even get dressed, her darkness shrouding her and keeping her decent, she bolted out the door, barreling the stunned thief over. She looked up at Leal and went scarlet, since he was still sprawled on the shattered remains of that cot on the floor, naked with his release and Ceriss’ all over his lap.

Leal was fearful of what had panicked Ceriss so much, but he was also saddened. Was she doomed to never get to relax and just be loved and held? He shook off the sorrow and without even dressing himself, ran up to the deck to face whatever horror had found them on the open sea.

Sirius, Book IV

A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 13

The expression on Nita's face made it more than apparent that she was mortified that Alps had actually run into a real problem in Luca. She was irritated with him having to go alone anyway, but agreed with the reason why he had to. And it had, in her open opinion, nearly cost him his life. He did not enjoy relating his story, but finally explained Ellis' involvement. She admitted to killing Chana, and then, right in front of Alps and Bree, had slain Enna. She was a killer, that much could not be denied. But it was not entirely clear who she was doing these things for. Did she have her own agenda? Did she have another allegiance? Alps had not related that he spoke to Ellis in a dream to summon her. It was something he was simply not sure how to explain. That was not the topic of discussion at that moment. What to do next was more important. Nidaja leaned back against a half-uprooted tree, still growing strong even after redirected by some storm of the past. It was a good metaphor for the slave himself. The general spoke calmly as Lyat stood quite typically by her side.

"Alps, you know my feelings on the matter. If Ellis really did kill Chana, there's an open spot on my bed for her." The queen's sister had not hidden her continued desire to throttle the former regional matriarch herself. Alps nodded to Nidaja and spoke up.

"I don't want my friends committing senseless acts. I know Chana was wrong to act as she did, but killing her was not necessary. We cannot state by our actions that such extreme punishment without careful justice is acceptable. That same mentality nearly caused my demise in Luca. Barr would have tried to help me, but if Enna had acted immediately..." Ellis' words rang in his mind. If she had immediately killed Alps and Bree, he would not have been able to call the fox to help him.

"I don't want to think about that." Nita said. "But you still have not given me a reason why we should involve ourselves in this issue right now. We have more important things to do." Reika nodded to Nita in agreement.

"Queen wolf is right, Alps." she rumbled. "Luca is having better time with bad person gone. We is leaving them to it." She looked to Lyat for his vote on it, and he nodded. The former slave gritted his teeth. This was not going as well as he had hoped. It was important to him, was it not so much to the others?

Diplomacy was hard. He did not envy Nita for having often to take a course she did not much care for because of the votes of the council. It seemed like it might be infuriating on important subjects.

“Mother, what is your opinion on the matter?” Alps knew that a vote from Luna might well sway some of the others. She commanded a lot of respect. She looked up, her fingers bridged as she sat upon a small hill just to the left of the half-fallen tree with Whale somewhat typically sitting beside her, quiet and somber. She seemed to be thinking hard. The priestess finally answered.

“I am torn, obviously. I know this is important to you because you grew up in that town, and I know that you worry that with almost half of them still in the mines they are vulnerable, but I have to agree with the queen. Unless there is some tactical advantage to this, we would be ill advised to raise a hand against the Silverlight now. This is a dangerous and likely unnecessary task that could just as well be left to the townspeople. The Silverlight intend to control a wide region, oppressing a small town won’t work in their favor. They will just as likely leave it alone, at least for a time, until they can figure out a better way to control it.” Alps sighed softly. That was his only chance to sway the vote. He had told the townspeople he would do this. He should not have spoken so quickly. It would weigh heavily on him in the days to come.

“No one asks me for my opinion? I am your guide after all...” Lira had not said much at all during Alps’ somewhat shocking meeting. She pulled her cape around her, looking a bit sharper than the queen’s lover had seen her thus far. Everyone looked her way.

“You had not offered it.” Nidaja spoke bluntly. “As a tactician, of course it’s valuable. Speak.”

“I say we hit the area’s Silverlight as hard as we can before we leave.” There was a perplexed look on Nita’s face in particular as her trusted friend said such an unexpected thing.

“What value is it to us, Lira?” asked Nidaja.

“This is a dangerous course of action.” Luna protested.

“Look.” Lira placed a rough hide map that she had rolled up in her hip-pack on the ground. “The Mahlta River...” She pointed at a river that passed right by Luca, to its north and went far north to a huge lake. It seemed very distant.

“I see it. It’s a slow moving, wide, murky affair this time of season. Why is that important?” Nidaja asked.

“The crystals were being taken to a river boat. A large portion of our planned journey is north because of the lower population and likewise fewer Uruk patrols. We could take the river all the way up to Lake Frostpelt. There is a small town at the mouth of the river that we could get a sailing vessel from to get across the lake.” There was a pause, silent and tense as the others considered the weight of what Lira was explaining. She elaborated slowly for Reika, who was eating a leaf of some kind. “It would cut the time it takes to get to our destination in half, weather permitting.” There was another short pause, and then Nidaja blanched slightly as she realized in full what was being suggested.

“Lira, we can’t steal a river boat. We don’t even know how to pilot one. I barely even know how a steam engine works; much less have the ability to maintain it for a long journey.” Alps widened his eyes. He was not sure initially what a river boat was, and was imagining something similar to Nidaja’s boat, maybe just smaller. The thought that it worked on steam power, a very new invention, made it even more appealing to get it out of the hands of the Silverlight. The idea that they had any kind of technological superiority over the royal house which had not picked up the use of the engine due to the cost of fabricating the parts was unsettling to him. It made him feel that the Silverlight had somehow managed better funding. This was likely coming from an outside influence, or even the avatar himself.

“My suggestion is that we steal the pilot too, actually.” Lira’s answer was matter-of-fact.

“I like this plan.” Whale stated calmly. Alps looked to him with a little surprise. Whale tended to remain quiet during these kinds of meetings of direction.

“Why do you like it?” Luna asked.

“Three reasons.” Whale stated. He stood up from where he was sitting on the leafy ground under a tall deciduous tree. “First, it sounds like there is an outside influence directing the Silverlight as I am sure others are starting to suspect, and if that is the case, then it’s likely that allowing them to keep getting stronger without any kind of resistance to make them pause and rethink their strategy will make them a bigger thorn in the future. Taking something with the value of a ship from them would be a pretty substantial detriment, and keeping Luca intact would allow the news to spread that they should not be trusted, limiting their easy influence. Certainly they would have more trouble masquerading regional matriarchs.” He began to pace. “Next, I am certain that they are not trying to destroy the crystals, since leaving them buried and not mining them up in the first place requires far less work. Those crystals are the hardest ingredient to obtain because they are not natural. They exist naturally but they draw on nether energy slowly over time. That is what makes them so good for linking essence over a distance. For controlling the Uruk. They are

very special, and they are a finite resource. Ground into sand and reformed into the crystal eyes for the Uruk, they are far too dangerous to leave as they are. I agree that we have to destroy them.” He looked to Nidaja and Nita in particular, as he knew the next course of action would be their decision and no one else’s. He seemed to at least respect that.

“And your third reason?” Nita asked solemnly.

“We do not know who moves in the shadows around us. Our efforts may well be undone if it becomes known even the direction we are moving. We can trust that the farm folk will not intentionally betray us perhaps, but unintentionally saying the wrong thing can be even more devastating. That boat, whatever a steam engine is or is not, is our best chance to move faster than the news of our journey. Moving fast is in our best interest.” Lira hopped up and down a little.

“Right! Right, I agree completely.” Nita sighed and looked at Nidaja.

“A fight with our own people... swayed to do wrong though they may be. You must know this is hard for me.” The queen stated softly.

“I know, but we cannot allow our risk to be for nothing. This is for all people. Asuna and Amani alike.” Alps was more adamant now more than before. He had not thought of everything that Vhale had said and it only cemented his resolve. Nita seemed to consider this for a bit longer before sighing and nodding slowly. Luna wrung her hands quietly a moment at that and stated,

“I will assist in any way that I can, but please understand... I cannot take a life unless I myself am threatened. I would be better to hang back and assist with healing. Blood on my hands actually affects the ease with which I can use the essence to heal. Uruk are one thing, but the Asuna or a lupine life is another entirely. Priestesses are not allowed to kill. It’s something Mannus was quick to use against us.” She then cupped her muzzle, seeming to have actually forgotten that the former “dark one” was right there. He nodded.

“Indeed. Effective tool, that little rule. Even I would avoid taking a life if I could. That’s why I let the Uruk do that, and why I dispatched of the Letai using the Shadowfall. No blood. Certain kinds of essence are repulsed heavily by physical suffering. You can see and sense just fine, but using it in certain ways becomes more difficult. Also, I have my own reasons for wanting no part in a face off against the Silverlight.” He crossed his arms. Alps understood. He was trying to separate himself from his dark past. Fighting anything but the Uruk was out of the question. Alps had not expected this particular problem however. He looked to Lyat and Reika.

“Will you two be able to fight?” the former slave inquired. Reika began emphatically nodding, until she looked at her brother, who was shaking his head. She began shaking her head as well, looking a little crestfallen.

“Asuna is trying to garner trust for future relationship with Amani empire. Killing of Amani outside of Asuna territory is currently unlawful.” The male hyena looked down as he said that, knowing that this was making things harder. “We can fight in self-defense, of course, but attacking boat is not defending. It is attacking.”

“I can fight.” Nidaja stated. “Nita should not. She uses healing essence as well. She might need that. That and you know... leader of our empire.” Alps nodded slowly at that. Lira spoke up.

“While I would rather not, I am also able to fight. But that leaves only three of us, including Alps who is not a trained fighter, to do this.” She seemed to gather Alps’ worries easily. “We are willing to take the boat, but it seems we are voting down the act of fighting the Silverlight. I don’t know where we go from here.” The white lupine male sat down against a tree and pondered that a moment. Reika finally shrugged at the conversation.

“Is silly we worrying about how many of us is attacking Silverlight. We is lucky if even boat captain is alive now.” Luna and Nita looked curious at her. Alps’ heart sank. Reika had thought of something that he had not openly considered right away. The girl hyena was likely right. He spoke up.

“I suddenly worry now that the choice was made for us because we have been slow to act.” Nidaja looked inquisitively at her sister’s consort, and then jumped up, seeming to ready herself for a conflict.

“What do you mean?” she asked hastily, obviously thinking that he meant they were about to be under attack.

“I was not the one who asked where the crystals were being kept originally.” Alps stated. Nita puzzled over that a moment and then widened her eyes.

“The fox.” Lira answered darkly.

“Those people may already be dead.” Luna added quickly with a fair amount of distress. “We need to move. We have to discourage her. If the dark one has agents here, they will tie Alps to the slaughter. This would certainly cause suspicion on the other side.” Everyone got up and began to move, Lyat immediately falling into step with Nidaja, Vhale with Luna, Alps with Nita on one side and Reika on the other. Lira did not seem to care that she was not paired

with anyone. She was used to moving alone. The green-furred survivalist barked out,

“As long as she leaves the boat intact, maybe it won’t matter, but I agree. Either way we need to get there quickly. If we are early enough to prevent her meddling we will do that, if too late, early enough to keep someone from reclaiming the ship.” The group moved hurriedly north from the forest, up to the river, and east to where the river boat likely would have been.

There was a loud crash as a wave broadsided the boat. Leal and Ceriss both grabbed the rigging for the mast which had come undone and worked to pull it secure. Leal was happy to find that Ceriss’ strength could be increased by her essence, making her more effective for that than he was. The pair managed to get it under control, but the ship was broadsided again, the Lhap having to be caught in mid-air by his captain. Leal was impressed by his diligence to a crewmate that he had seemed to initially dislike. He pulled himself tight to the rigging as well, just to hold on. With his huge ears it looked like he might just blow away in the wind. It did not seem to be raining, however, which was unusual for the severity of the storm. Leal began to suspect Ceriss was right. This had something to do with their cargo.

“Why are we still getting broadsided?!” screamed Kaji, the ship’s captain. “I thought you turned the ship!” The fox barked adamantly,

“I did! The waves ain’t even goin’ th’ same direction as the wind, it keeps changing!” Ceriss pulled herself to the edge of the ship. Lunaris, gritting his teeth, soaked by a wave that had crashed over the bow of the boat, helped the priestess to her feet. She cried out into the din of wind and waves.

“I know! Hold fast, this is not an act of the natural world!” She peered out into the sea, then up at the sky, then back toward the ship. Leal tried in vain to catch a line that broke off to find out what it had been tied to.

“Anchor’s gone! Must have popped off on that last broadside!” he barked.

“Shit! My lucky anchor! We’re doomed!” the captain wailed.

“Lucky anchor?!” Neit screamed. “What made that thing lucky?!”

“It was the only thing that survived the sinking of my last ship!” the captain shouted over the roaring gale that seemed to be ever-changing its direction.

“It was on the ship that sank! That’s not lucky!” the former thief yelled back. “That might have been the unluckiest part of the ship!”

“No!” Ceriss yelled, enhancing the volume of her voice with essence enough that it startled everyone to focus. “The unluckiest part of the ship is in the hold right now! That’s what’s causing the storm!” Leal looked back to the priestess, then looked in the direction of the hold. He used what he had been taught about essence viewing to see it, even through the wood of the vessel. It was glowing brightly. It was probably glowing visibly in the hold. It was doing something, of that he was certain.

“We have to get rid of it!” the captain barked. “This boat’s not made to handle this!”

“No! We have to get it farther away from shore. The storm’s not blowing us back, it’s still moving us away!” Ceriss said loudly. Kaji called back furiously.

“We can’t last to get further away! It’s going to snap the mast like a brittle old crust of bread!” There was a loud pop, and the fox screamed. He went sailing overboard as he was holding rigging attached to the mid-part of the mast, which was sheered just below its connection point and flung by the winds far off the starboard side. Lunar is tried to grab him but he was not even close. The large black wolf called out fearfully. Those waters were so turbulent and dark it was not even possible to see the fox that went in.

“No!” Neit cried out. “Noooo!” She obviously did not want to see someone who was not even directly involved with this mess die for it. Ceriss moved unnaturally quickly over to that side of the ship, and her entire arm glowed with a violet light as the fox was wrenched out of the water, from below its surface, and right back onto the boat, sputtering, eyes wide in shock. As he was pulled out of the water, he had been surrounded in the same violet light.

“Hold onto him!” Ceriss shouted to the other fox. He did as told.

“Good heavens!” the captain shouted, having seen her do what had been impossible in his life time. Leal gritted his teeth. Well, that secret was out at least. “What am I dealing with here!? This was not part of the deal!” Ceriss ignored the stormy interrogation.

“Prepare the life boat!” the priestess barked.

“There’s not one!” the captain shouted.

“What?!” Neit and Leal both shouted. Lunar is groaned disdainfully.

"I had a lucky anchor!" the captain screamed over the wind. The ship was broadsided again.

"We're gonna die!" Neit sobbed.

"Pull it together!" Ceriss shouted. "Leal, if this ship goes down with us on it, we will be crushed as it comes apart, this thing's barely together as it is. We have to get off now!"

"What?! And go into the ocean?" the captain yelled. "How will that fix things?" he asked.

"I'd do as she says, Captain!" Lunariss shouted loudly. "She's every bit what you think and more. If you want to survive, we need to act, not sit around and hope for lucky anchors to come and save us." The general pulled the rigging tight again, doing all he could to try to hold the crumbling ship together, but it would not last long. Every single attempt to fix something was a patch job, and certainly not likely to even hold long on a calm sea, much less the monster that they had awakened around them there.

"I will make a raft, being smaller will make it more likely to survive! Leal, get rope, we will need it!" Amid the loud protests of foxes, the guard struggled on hands and knees to get to the door to go below deck. He managed it finally, and pulled his way through the seemingly spinning hall to the storage room. Things were tumbling around everywhere, but he finally found a length of about fifty feet of old, useless-looking rope. They really did pick a winner for sailing over the sea! Leal managed to get back up to the deck, feeling suddenly queasy. He could not be sure if it was from the violent pitching of the ship or the fact that he was terrified. He'd never seen a storm this terrible. The clouds seemed to be getting closer to the surface of the water, turning in a threatening fashion, as if a tornado was about to touch down on it.

"Can everyone swim?" Ceriss called out loudly. Everyone answered in the affirmative. Leal was impressed that she asked. One would suspect that people who travel the sea would mark that as a job requirement, but this captain was not overly competent, it seemed. "Move to the front of the ship, everyone! I am going to have to remove part of the deck!"

"How do you intend on doing that?!" the captain cried, flailing a bit, and almost toppling. The ship was swiped at the side again, and nearly listed completely over. Still, everyone did as told. Ceriss knelt down close to the deck, hands upon it. Her arms glowed violet again. "Oh. Shit!" The captain backed closer to the front of the ship, helping to shelter the lighter fox against the wind. There was a series of loud pops and cracking noises, and then, rather suddenly, a large portion of the deck simply lifted up, and flipped right overboard, snapping some additional rigging.

“Impossible!” Neph cried, having not realized how he was even pulled from the water.

“Not for her!” Leal barked, swelling with pride even among his fear. Sometimes he forgot, holding her in his arms, what she was actually capable of doing. She seemed weakened by that, slumping over the edge, and rather suddenly vomiting. That was not a good sign. Leal moved toward her, and she shook her head, coughing and sputtering a bit.

“No, I’m okay! It’s like being kicked in the gut, it’ll go away. Get everyone on the raft!” she called.

“How are we supposed to survive when we are on it?!” Neit rightfully asked.

“It’s small enough I can control it, and things should get better if we move away from the ship! Trust me!” Ceriss called. The fox immediately launched himself over the edge. He seemed to have a lot of practice abandoning ship. Leal made careful note of that as Kaji failed to be the last one off the ship, getting off right after his crewmate. Leal picked up Neit, who protested by biting him, but he understood that, she was absolutely terrified. He vaulted over the edge just before another wave crashed into them. There was a hard impact of water, as the next wave coming sucked the ocean right out from under him, and what had been, seconds before, an eight foot drop turned into nearly a thirty foot drop with the ship seeming to hover over him as he fell. They surfaced right beside the ship, having only barely cleared it as it surged down the wave toward them. Lunaris struck the water as soon as it was level again, knowing better, it appeared, than to jump after the crest.

“You’re all insane!” Neit sobbed, choking on saltwater.

“Where’s Ceriss?” cried Neph, pulling himself up onto the splintered but thankfully floating section of deck. Leal pulled Neit toward the makeshift raft. It was barely staying above water, and it seemed like it could snap in half at any moment. Ceriss was already on the raft, somehow. Her hair was not even wet. Had she jumped right to it? The raft rather suddenly stabilized, even though the ocean had not. It seemed to “stick” to the water. It made climbing on a bit easier. The captain was the last one to get on, helped on by Lunaris who had clamored on board along with Neit. Everyone was alive, at least.

“No! My best ale is on there!” Kaji cried, reaching longingly toward the ship as it simply snapped in half, and began to slowly vanish beneath the swirling waters. Leal realized suddenly that they were moving away from the ship at an unusually fast rate. He turned and saw that Ceriss was concentrating hard, hand touching the surface of the water, as if she was letting an unseen chain pull them

away to safety. The clouds reached the top of the ship, spinning and dark and threatening. The whole vessel practically exploded, being shredded by the intense winds of a powerful tornado. The farther they got from the ship, the calmer the winds got, though the water was still choppy some way out. The rest of the clouds, though more slowly rotating, descended upon them. Leal was at first afraid they would be shredded to, but it was only a cool, dark fog, even the wind eventually fell silent.

A few minutes later, everyone clinging to the still moving faux water craft, the water fell mostly calm. There were no real waves, but the craft continued to move, powered for a time by the intensely focused Ceriss who pushed the craft in a straight line far away from where the ship went down, but the fog clung to the ocean as far as the eye could see, which was never very far. Everyone was silent for a time, and Leal knew why. They were mulling over the fact that they were more than a day from shore with great wind, and the chance that they would make it back before they died of thirst was pretty remote. Lunariss and Leal worked quietly to secure some of the flotsam from the ship to the raft to increase buoyancy, the priestess no longer pushing the craft a moment, as she seemed lost in thought. Occasionally she would adjust their heading, but she was not using much energy for that.

“So we just wait for the end, then...” Neit finally said, having the lack of decorum to force the subject.

“Yep.” The captain was pretty secure in what he said.

“No.” the priestess stated calmly. Leal looked back to her. Kaji spoke before Leal could.

“We don’t have a lot of options. We have a couple of days before we die out here. Do you have another trick up your sleeve?” he asked. “What are you supposed to be anyway, a Letai? What the hell was all that back there?” The priestess answered.

“I keep pushing us. I can move this small raft almost as fast as the wind brought us here if I work hard at it. And yes, I’m Letai.” Neph gasped loudly at that, cupping his smallish foxy muzzle. Ceriss ignored the reaction. “And however much you think that complicates matters, Kaji, you are not even close to how complicated things are.” Leal sighed softly at the dark priestess.

“Even I know that your well runs dry, Ceriss. You can’t do it around the clock, and you got sick from overexerting yourself on the ship.” He appreciated her resolve, and her attempt to calm Neit, but surely that was not realistic.

“It’s not that different from being in a healing circle.” The dark furred priestess put her fingers back into the water. The craft started moving again.

The amount of essence force that it took surely had to put strain on a body. Leal was aware her body was nearly at its limit already. This could break Ceriss.

“What’s a healing circle?” asked Neit. Neph chimed in.

“If the Letai encountered a town with mass casualties or somethin’, they would be havin’ several work together t’ focus a lot of healing energy o’er several people at once while one focused on individual healing.” The captain looked at his crewmate with a little surprise. Leal looked to the vulpine as he explained, since Ceriss would not talk while she was pushing the ship. The fox continued to speak. “Sometimes, they would do this fer hours and hours. It took a lot of power, but the Letai store essence like a grain bin, puttin’ more and more in their bodies to use up the reserve for just such an occurrence.” Leal nodded to this. He did not want to tell the fox that Ceriss had been using essence like it was in danger of going bad for the past few days. Her endurance for handling essence was not really in question, as she maintained disguises constantly, but this was a lot of effort, if she could not even talk while she did it, and she still held onto her darkened form. Would it break eventually? Would everyone see the battered lupine lady she really was? That would shake their confidence to be sure.

“How do you know about that?” the captain asked the fox curiously.

“My parents were somethin’ of an authority on their old customs and the like. They told us stories all the time. My grandfather owned a library, and my dad was a fan of the old tales. It’s how he met my mother. So obviously, they told me about it.” He nodded and sat back down. At least it made better sense to the guard why the vulpine was so shocked. He knew what a big deal Ceriss being alive really was. Leal leaned down over Ceriss as she wore a calm but very focused expression.

“Don’t worry, Ceriss. We will do what we can to help you. Don’t hesitate to ask. We’re in this together.” He said, wondering if she could teach him the trick she was using. He was younger, maybe he would sustain things a bit better. Just watching her was not enough to learn. He learned to see the essence, but not to really use it. It would likely take longer than they could survive out here for him to learn a trick of this magnitude.

“How does she know we are going the right way?” Neit asked. Ceriss finally answered, as the craft slowed, her focus broken.

“I don’t. But I know the current lay of the essence around me. It doesn’t tell me what direction I should be going, but it at least keeps our heading. Whatever direction we are going, I will keep going in that direction.” That did not seem to encourage Neit.

“Where will we end up?” she asked.

“Somewhere alive, that’s all that matters right now.” The priestess sighed softly. “I think that we got the crystal far enough away. Diera should be safe at least. It was not for nothing.” She seemed to take strength in that.

“Not much use in being a hero if you don’t get to come back for the party.” Neit stated.

“The greatest heroes don’t get parties.” Leal said in a soft, sage tone.

“The greatest heroes end up locked in dark crystals to suffer the darkest of their nightmares for eternity because the entire world has forgotten they even existed.” Ceriss growled darkly. Leal gritted his teeth. The craft began to move again. Neit appropriately shut the hell up. Lunaris oooohed softly on Neit’s behalf. The tiny, barren raft, populated by a captain with no ship, a fox from the islands, a Letai Priestess, a thief and a guard and an Amanian general continued to drift swiftly but quietly over barely perceptible waves. The parting shot for the booby-trapped crystal as it was pulled out of range was to kill the motion of wind and water to trap anyone who was even successful in moving it out of range. It was not assumed by the dark one that any priestesses existed, so they were supposed to be dead in the water even if they had abandoned the crystal. They were not supposed to be able to escape. They might still have been doomed, and even if they survived, they had no idea where they would end up.

Alps and his companions’ journey there was rushed and tense, nearly a run most of the way as forest gave way to rolling hills, the sounds of wind rushing through leaves replaced with the scent of wildflowers that one could smell but never quite see. The day seemed remarkably calm for all the problems that had occurred, and the new ones Alps was sure they would have to deal with by the time they got to where they were going. When would things begin to return to normal for him? What was even normal anymore? His life with Chana had been hard, but at least he had a pretty good idea of what he would be doing weeks out. Now, he could not plan ahead even half an hour. He could be attacked, kidnapped, subjected to spirits and phantoms from the present and past, pushed into places that hardly count as places, and be forced to shatter reality to escape it. The wordless plodding toward their destination allowed him to consider this for some time.

There was a small extension of the town of Luca that acted as a modest trade and fishing port on the wide and slow Mahlta. It took nearly two hours from their camp to get there, but the little town seemed quiet as the Alps’ robed entourage approached. It was late in the day, but there should have been someone there.

"This is not looking good." Lira stated. She moved back to the group, having been slightly ahead. Nita stopped short of one of the low wooden fences that seemed more useful for determining a property boundary than actually preventing entry. It was for looks, not function. A stand of trees stood in the center of the little half-town that existed there which blocked the view of the dock, taunting the group as they approached. What lie on the other side? Would they be attacked?

"I smell blood." Nidaja was the first to verify what Alps' senses had just started to tell him. His stomach knotted a bit. This could be very bad. Would she have just knocked people out like she had with the Luca town guard, or would she be more vicious since these people were acting directly against the royal house? Who was Ellis even loyal to? As they moved cautiously around the stand of trees, the scene unfolded terribly.

The first obvious bookmark to what must have been a very one-sided encounter was a nearly perfect ring of five lupine individuals of various sorts, ages, and builds laying on their backs with their eyes open to the dimming heavens, expressionless and still. There was an identical band of blood across each person's chest. In each hand, there was a weapon drawn, clutched tightly, but clean. Alps approached them, but Luna held back, seeming detached. There were seven of them.

"They all went in a single stroke." Lira stated, following immediately behind Alps. "They confronted her... stood around her, and she sent them all to the life stream in an instant. They probably didn't even know they were being killed." Alps remembered with a pang of anger that she even told Enna that she didn't know she was dead. Was killing so easy? Was it right? These people stood in their way, and would intend the queen herself this very fate. Was it right, was it justified that Ellis killed them first? Alps whispered softly as the wind pulled the scent of blood around him, and poisoned his senses more and more.

"I guess they were a threat. I mean, their weapons were out. If I know her, she hadn't even shown herself to be a threat by that point." His mother took his hand to lead him away from the lifeless forms. He was an essence user, perhaps she wanted to protect him from whatever effect their blood might have.

"Are they Silverlight, or did she take out the villagers?" Nidaja asked. "Would it matter?"

"I think it would." Alps said in a murmur. "I don't want to think she could do this to innocent people."

"This one's got a crest on a large coin." Nidaja stated as she searched one of the bodies. "This one too. A sword and moon... I don't recognize it. It's not

the Silverlight, but it looks like they are all carrying it. Maybe it's something they changed after Azia was gone." Whale moved further on as Nita held back. Reika and Lyat stayed with her, forming something of a perimeter around the queen as they had been doing any time the situation was tense. Mannus finally spoke, his voice grim.

"While she might have gotten the first few around her by surprise, she was not so subtle with the others." Alps moved over to where he was, fully beyond the stand of trees. The first thing the white wolf became aware of was the boat. It was a very unusual design. He had heard of the river boat before, even back when he was with Chana. She had told him about it, but stated that she hated all the attention that the experiment was getting. They were too expensive and hard to maintain. It would pass. But it did not pass. This one had been in active use for three years.

After the attention-grabbing watercraft, his attention went to the obvious evidence of a rather disproportional fray. There were eight more bodies of lupines flung this way and that in an apparent line from the initial ring of corpses to the boat, and even two lying off the edge of the gangplank. They had been dispatched in various ways, but it appeared that a sword had been used in most cases. There was a soft thump, and everyone immediately became defensive. Alps looked toward the sound, and saw a rather rare site. A male emerald Amanian. Most tended to stay in Diera, close to the royal family as they shared a common ancestry, and they tended to be well cared for because it was assumed in most cases they would sire the children of the royal house. No one wanted to deny themselves such an honor by not being available. This one seemed frightened and confused. The moment he came into view, Nidaja and Nita pulled their cowls over their heads.

"H... Halt, who's there?" came an unsteady inquiry. Alps recognized his red and white sash. He was a member of the town guard. He didn't have any armor, but most in the outer villages did not. It was pricey. He just wore a brown shirt with a red sash around his middle.

"Did you see what happened here?" Alps asked. At least it seemed that Ellis left someone alive.

"I came out and they were like this. It just got real quiet. I heard them talking to someone, and then I heard a shout, but they told me I was supposed to stay inside all day today because they had some boxes I wasn't supposed to be messing with, so I figured they could handle it, and if they needed me they would call me. They didn't say anything else, and after a while I poked my head out just to see if everyone had gone. And it was like this. Just like you see it."

Lira pulled her hood down, letting the male see her. He stepped back a little. Emerald Amanians were not terribly common this far out, so it was a surprise, but it had been a surprise to Alps as well.

“You wear the garb of the town guard. Why are you guarding this place?” Lira crossed her arms skeptically. Alps nodded at her lack of trust. She was not a survivalist just to be gullible.

“It was this or the mines, which would *you* choose?” he asked bluntly. “Who are you people, you aren’t from the Silverlight. Are you from their parent group?” he asked. Alps furrowed his brow.

“Parent group?” he asked softly.

“Never mind, forget I said anything.” The guard sat on a part of the low and decorative fence. “Look, I’m just glad you aren’t the brigands that did this. I bet whatever those boxes had in them sure was valuable.” He looked at Nita and Nidaja intently, but they were not showing their faces. They were far too recognizable, as both of their faces were emblazoned on the highest valued coin in the land. Alps called the guard’s attention back.

“Do you know where the pilot is for the boat?” The white-furred male was not overly hopeful, but he had to ask. The green-furred guard pointed to the river.

“The Silverlight guys said he fell in the water a while back, but they had me kind of moving it up and down the river the past month or so. We’ve been able to get around on it, it’s not too complicated.” He walked over toward Lyat, who also had his hood up, but that did nothing to hide the spots on his arms which were bare from nearly the elbow down. “Shit.” He just stopped dead in his tracks, reaching for his sword.

“I’d advise that you think a little harder about how you want to spend your last day. It could be with family decades from now, or it could be here and now.” Lira stated calmly. He held still. Lyat did not move either, though his sister moved a little closer to him.

“I have to protect the town.” His voice wavered a bit, and the fear there was more than plain.

“I just got done protecting it. The false Regional Matriarch is dead.” Alps sighed softly. Saying who did it was not even important at that point.

“Wait, what?” asked the guard, turning to Alps suddenly.

“Barr is now the regional matriarch. The rest of the town guard is fetching everyone back from the mines.” Alps tried to make this sound as positive as it really was. It seemed to work.

“No kidding? This is not a trick? That woman... is gone?” he asked.

“Yes.” Luna stated. “And you are going to need to pilot that boat one more time, and then we can get you back to where you belong.” Alps looked with some surprise over to his mother. Technically, she was not giving him a choice with it, which seemed more forceful than what he was used to seeing from her.

“If you guys really did improve things in town, I will gladly take you away from here. Is there any way I could go back first and verify that this is the truth?” he asked. Alps looked warily at Lira and then his mother. They were more aware of the tactical needs in this case. Luna answered officially.

“I am fine with it. It will take us a little bit of time to properly deal with... the state of things here. I would prefer we leave under the cover of darkness if that is possible anyway. Do you agree?” she asked this last part of Nita. The robed individual nodded. If this was indeed a town guard, he would be easier to travel with knowing that the people he was with meant him no harm.

“I... I will be right back, I promise.”

“Wait.” Lyat’s tone was very cold. He stopped with a jerk, as if shouted at.

“Y... yes?” asked the guard. It was Luna who spoke next.

“You may only go back to verify things are going well in town. Do not speak to anyone about what you are doing here, what has happened here, or where you are going. You will only endanger yourself and other innocent people.” Alps had not considered that he might tell the town about him, since the town already knew about him. But they did not know he was travelling with an Asuna or two and it was better if they did not. He felt that they did not trust him a whole lot anyway.

“I promise. I just want to know everyone’s okay. I’ve not been in this town long, but there’s someone I have to make sure is alright.” Luna nodded to him.

“He’d feel less disposable if you people would ask his name you know.” Lira stated.

“Huh?” Alps asked.

“I’m Mytan Shuraza.” His reply had a bit of pride to it, making Alps feel that the last name had some meaning.

"Well, hurry Mytan. We intend to leave the moment of the sun's last light." Luna rumbled. He bowed to the pretty white lupine lady and then bolted.

"He's not coming back." Whale said sourly.

"I would not have wanted to kidnap him." Luna stated.

"It sounded like you might at first." Alps said.

"I would have kidnapped him." Lira growled in a meaningful sensual tone.

"What's an Emerald Amanian even doing as a guard out in the sticks?" Alps asked flatly.

"He's from the Shuraza family." Lira answered matter-o-factly. Lyat looked at her blankly. Luna spoke up.

"Which means what, precisely?" she asked. Alps' mother was not well informed about current politics and customs either.

"Ironically, they are interested in bringing back the Letai customs and teachings." Nita answered for her. "They left Diera two generations ago to push deeper into the border territories to find artifacts and books and the like if they could so they could bring back what they felt was the real power that the Emerald Amanians should have." Alps felt he understood exactly why Nita knew that. Her mother was exploring and hunting for those same artifacts.

"So wait, this guy comes from a family who practically worships the Letai?" Alps asked uneasily. They would have to keep some secrets to keep him calm. But if they were to be attacked at any point in their journey, those secrets would be difficult to keep.

"This sounds like it will be a fun trip, if he comes back." Lira laughed.

"If he's got something he's protecting here in town, I can't see him running off to come with people who might have just committed wholesale slaughter under his nose." Whale moved over to one of the bodies and started dragging it toward the forest.

"Where are you going with that?" Luna asked.

"Hiding it." Whale answered calmly.

"We *bury* the dead, Whale." The priestess growled.

"These people were criminals." The former ultimate foe to the Letai murmured.

"We don't have time to dig a dozen holes for people who meant to murder and destroy." Vhale growled. This was the first time Alps could recall seeing him disagreeing with or resisting Luna.

"There's time." She said coldly, and knelt down. She placed a hand on the soft ground and vine-like roots erupted from the soil all around her, her hands glowing softly in green light that was visible even to those not able to see essence. The roots all toiled around her, opening gaping holes, uneven though they were, all around Luna. They were deep enough to put those who had fallen to rest, but they were not exactly perfect graves. The black-furred wolf watched in silent awe, and then looked away, toward the slowly setting sun.

"There. Cast them in, then we can let the roots cover them over. No need to just leave this kind of horror in our wake. It won't help things." The priestess dusted off her robes. Alps had seen Luna command roots in the past, but had not been aware she was that strong with them. Vhale and Reika and Lyat helped with the bodies, 13 in all. Had it been a very lucky surprise attack, or was Ellis really just that level of fighter? The white former slave tried to assist with burial, but Luna openly objected to him handling the bodies.

After a few soft words in her native tongue, Luna left those to bring fertility to the soil, interred and unmarked as they were. The group turned their focus to the boat itself, still moored to the short, wide dock by the river Mahlta.

It was dark blue with silver trim, and looked like a squarish floating tavern if he had to choose an appearance. There was a tall barrel like post on each corner of the flat-bottomed boat. As it was explained to him by one of its operators at the town's inn, each vertical post had a paddle that oscillated forward and backward inside the post, and each post could be individually controlled under steam power from the center of the boat. The operator could adjust the amount of power to the post to control the speed of the boat, and could also turn a wheel for each post to control the direction of out-flow for the paddles, which meant that the boat could hold its position in the water no matter which way it was going, could move from side to side, forward or backward, or even turn at a nearly complete stop. It was not as fast as a sailing ship, but it was perfect for navigating the winding, often somewhat shallow Mahlta river. Alps did not understand much of this when it was initially described to him, but as he looked at the ship, it made a little more sense. The operator was explaining it to try to impress the people at the inn's tavern, but Alps had been fascinated by it then. He wished he had paid more attention.

"Let's have a look around on board..." Lira stated calmly. "I've been wanting to see this ship for a while anyway." The white male lupine followed, and

the others came along a moment later, feeling confident that the place did not look like a government sanctioned slaughter anymore.

Inside, the ship looked rather elegant, and reminded Alps even more of an inn. At first, he was not certain why regular ships did not look like that, but as he thought about it, he realized that they could not. The often violent motion of the ocean made it easier to care for a ship that was fairly utilitarian. The river was not likely to ever be so harsh when travelled upon. The river craft would be moored in the rather sheltered parts of the river during the rains, but ultimately even in a flood it was not likely to be pitched nearly onto its side.

He toured the craft to find rooms, some quite stately, a nice and fairly well stocked galley, and a pilot's cabin at the top that gave a great view all the way around the vessel to allow for precise piloting and confident awareness of what was around the ship. There were a dozen levers at the front of this room, and no steering wheel. Alps was pretty sure he could not pilot this boat. He hoped Mytan really could. Would they really spend such a large portion of their trip in this kind of comfort? There were beds, a lovely sitting room, and a nice deck around most of the boat to watch the lazy river beneath.

"Looks like she missed a few of them." Whale said from the galley as they passed by it a second time. He held up a small box that had two yellowish crystals in it. Alps recognized the color. It's what was used for the Uruk's eyes, but they were five-sided dual-terminated crystals, so they did not have the smooth, glassy oval feel of Uruk eyes. As he said, they were carefully formed to their purpose.

"I'll just be holding onto those." Luna stated softly, taking them away from Whale. He laughed at her, which made Alps feel a little better, as he worried that the dark-furred wolf might be genuinely offended at Luna's distrust.

"Be my guest. I want nothing to do with them." He looked at Luna as she walked off, and Alps flattened his ears a bit. Was he looking so wistfully at the now prohibited crystals, or was he gazing after his mother? Surely not. On their first meeting, she nearly killed him, and he sent her son into oblivion right in front of her. Maybe he missed what he used to be able to do. He slapped Whale on the back, shaking him from his daydream and murmured,

"Thanks for being understanding. I know it's hard sometimes, but you have our support." Alps leaned over the edge as the others moved around the boat to stake out their temporary residences. Reika in particular seemed excited, skittering around opening cabinets, boxes, anything she could find to satisfy her curiosity, chatting away with Bone the entire time. Lira kindly avoided asking questions about that. Whale watched the others a bit, and looked back to Alps.

“Given what I am, when this is over, you will be better off not having the liability of my identity causing problems for you and your soon-to-be life mate.” He stated. “What will become of me?” Alps was actually happy that Vhale asked this. It meant that he had started to care about his fate.

“I have given a bit of thought to that. My mother has to, I am sure. Trust that we will have an answer when the time comes for us settle down a little. I assume that you will be allowed to live in peace somewhere out of the way, where you won’t have to worry about such things.” Alps cradled his chin in his hands, leaning against the railing of the boat, watching as the sun got lower in the sky.

“I had a garden, a really nice garden, back when I was a student at the Temple of Gize. The shrine to lost lovers was considered to be one of the most beautiful places in the world because of it. I think I would like to do that again.” Alps looked at Vhale with surprise as he smiled. His tail wagged slowly, the first time Alps had seen it move. The white lupine grinned. Vhale was used as a weapon against the entire world, he had a lot of guilt, but the close proximity to the Letai were healing him. Perhaps he would never really fully recover, but if he could wag his tail again, it was not all in vain.

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 14

The fog seemed to have spread out over miles and miles and as the morning of the following day pressed on, it held fast in its battle with the sun. The crystal generated a lot of this fog, but the real problem was likely that the air was so calm over that part of the ocean that it caused the fog bank to stick. The slow moving air may have been moving the fog in the very same direction they were going and they would not know. It was a strange weather dynamic to be stuck in, but even in the gray morning, they could not navigate. Ceriss was obviously tired, and the raft was not moving so fast as it had been before. Leal had long ceased to feeling self-conscious as he had Lunar's jacket wrapped around his thighs, since he had come out of the cabin naked in the storm. Ceriss, in her ability to make her fur so shadowy and black, was difficult to make out intimately, so she seemed completely unconcerned about modesty.

Neit had spent a while talking to the fox about their customs and their homeland, finding out that, as it had been explained, the Lhap were fairly tribal, but the curious things were very well informed. Neph did not have a rough and tribal feel to him like she expected. They were not savages, and she found him rather endearing to talk to. It had calmed her nerves.

The captain was quiet for most of the night. His ship was gone. As far as he was concerned, it was the crazy mission he was sent on that was responsible, so he did feel a little less social. He even slept for a time. When Kaji awoke, he was no more cordial. Ceriss spoke little also, since she was focused on moving the raft, seemingly endlessly in one direction, not even sure what direction that was in the fog. She would rest every once in a while, but tap the ship back in line if it drifted off course.

About mid-way into the day, Ceriss finally moved to the center of the raft and rested on her back a moment. There was a period of quiet as everyone looked at her. Leal felt he knew what was coming. She could not press on anymore. They may drift off course before she could recover, and there was no way that they would know if they were continuing in a straight line. This thing had beaten them. Finally, she spoke.

"Leal... After the last few days with me, I know you are tapped out. You have expended quite a lot of essence, and are worn a little thin. I cannot draw

from you the kind of energy I need to recover and press on..." The guard nodded at this, and Neit gritted her teeth, seeming to understand where it seemed this was going. She was out of energy because Leal had been pushed just as hard as the lady wolf over the past few days.

"It's alright. You tried. We are thankful of that. Maybe... just maybe the water current will do the rest." Leal stroked her forehead. She shook her head slowly, panting softly.

"Oh, you'd know if I were done, Leal." The priestess stated softly. "I would look done. I do not. No, I am saying that I need more energy than you would yield at the moment. That does not mean I cannot get it from the others who have not had such a difficult trial these past few days." She panted.

"What do you mean?" Neit asked, getting onto her knees by the priestess. She seemed willing to help the Priestess, as it would, of course, be saving her own life.

"She has to draw essence energy." The fox spoke softly, reverently "It's just like in the stories. But the one she has been drawing from is pretty dried out, yes? He's why you could pull the ship apart and save us like that?" he asked. Leal had not thought that it was his power that was used to save everyone. It made him feel better about what he had done to Ceriss right before everything went wrong.

"If not from Leal, how will you get your energy? Does it have to be someone special?" Neit asked.

"Actually, there is someone on the raft now that has stronger essence, even if less focused, than Leal does." The priestess sat up a bit as she said that.

"M...me?" Neit asked incredulously, seeming to blush all over.

"No." Neph whispered, looking back at Ceriss.

"Huh?" Neit asked. Lunarix perked up at the fox's interruption. The priestess spoke.

"The Lhap Islanders are brimming with energy. There's a reason they are very familiar with Letai customs." Ceriss murmured weakly. Neph spoke up.

"The Letai came to Lhap festivals t' draw upon our energy. We had dancing, celebrations, feasts, and ... other *nice* events... in their honor when they arrived and they would bring good fortune with them, and would barter and trade and provide wealth t' the island. 'Twas a good relationship." Neit nodded,

a little crestfallen that she was not the one with power that Ceriss was indicating, but not seeming to mind that.

“So, how does the essence drawing thing work exactly? You just... touch him and take essence until he gets tired from it?” Kaji asked. Leal lowered his head a little, having not considered that part of it until that very moment. The fox’s captain and his own captain were both right there on the raft. This might be a little awkward for all involved.

“Well...” the fox tugged one of his ears nervously. “I mean, on the islands they was drawin’ the pleasure of feasts and dancing and laughter and other kinds of merry-makin’. We don’t have that on th’ open sea with just the lot of us.” Neit looked like she was in silent shock.

“Wait, so how the hell’s she supposed to draw from you?” Kaji asked.

“Bitch.” Neit growled. “Tell me that’s not why you insisted I come! You said you might need my abilities! This was not what I thought you meant!” She fumed at the Priestess. Leal had expected she might be irritated by that. He was right. Still, the thought of tending to Neit himself was not so bad. He was apparently too exhausted by Ceriss’ standards to be the one, though. Was that why she originally brought Lunaris along? Was his own commanding officer supposed to be the other source of essence for the priestess?

“I have to focus on keeping the raft straight, Neit, I can’t do this myself. If I travel in a situation where it might be possible I need extra essence, I cannot rely solely on my own. The Priestesses back in my time kept a temple boy... often more than one. When we travelled, they would happily compete for the honor of going with us. That aside, we usually had a new priestess or at least a student who would happily lend her essence in a time of need.” Ceriss sat up slowly to look at Neit. “The Letai are nearly all gone. Luna and I are all who remain. I don’t have a lot of options, and I had to be sure there was someone who could assist me in that regard. I will be using your essence Neit; you are young and strong...” The rehabilitated thief cupped her muzzle, recognizing what Ceriss was asking her to do. The dark-furred priestess continued. “... you still get to help us with your power, but you won’t be doing it alone.” Ceriss touched her fingertips to the water as she lay back on the raft again, correcting the angle again.

“What if the fox doesn’t want me to do that?!” she asked, flailing a bit. Leal could understand her frustration with the situation. But, he trusted Ceriss’ choice. From what he understood, she was one of the last Priestesses to be Shadowfallen. There was likely a reason for that. She was a survivor. He looked at the vulpine, who was looking away with some measure of embarrassment. Kaji was staring intently, seeming to understand what was

being asked, but not having a clue where it would end up. Neph murmured something very softly.

“What was that?” Kaji asked. “Speak up boy, a real flesh and blood Letai Priestess is askin’ for your help!” The captain seemed to be suddenly interested in honor about the situation, but Leal could not help but wonder if there were a more lecherous reason that he wanted to see Neph help in this regard. After all, it would have been entertaining to watch.

“I’m okay with it.” He said louder.

“By the essence!” Neit exclaimed, highly embarrassed. “I don’t know half the people on this raft, and I actively despise one of them!” she sneered at the guard-general who got her into this mess. Lunaris stifled a laugh. Neph stammered a little.

“She doesn’t have to. I mean, I can... I mean, if it means gettin’ us home, pleasure is not that hard on m’ own...” The fox seemed willing to do what was needed for the priestess. “I mean... I kin ignore everyone else and just... lay against ya and...” Kaji laughed that time.

“Quiet, you, you are not helping.” The Priestess snapped. She then smiled at the blonde-furred vulpine. “Neph, I appreciate that, but I am going to need a lot more essence than that alone would provide. Neit was brought for a reason. She has a special kind of essence. It’s very hard to explain to someone who can’t see it, but it’s very malleable. I can use it to help draw in other essence. I did not choose her because I knew Lunaris could force her to come. I chose her because if I needed essence... and could not draw it myself... there had to be someone who had the same kind of essence I use.” Neit perked right up at that.

“I use the same kind of essence you do?” she asked.

“No, not use.” Ceriss clarified, adjusting the course of the ship again. “Have. You don’t have the kind of volume of essence it takes to learn to control it. With heavy training, I might teach you to see it the way Leal does, but it just happens to be the same ‘color’ as mine, which makes it perfect for what I need you to do. Provoke Neph’s essence in my place, just as I would. I can draw it, but I need you to be the one triggering it... In such an encounter, essence mixes, and it allows me to hold on to it easily. And Neit, it might take more than once.”

“Good on ya, Neph.” Kaji said playfully. “Looks like you don’t need no anchors.”

“Kaji...” Lunaris warned.

"Whatever. Next week we are gonna be shitting ourselves over this exact conversation over a pint, I swear to ya." He laughed, and then turned around, feet in the water, butting out of the conversation. Lunar is sighed.

"I know you don't like me, Neit, but..." the general began.

"No, it's alright, Lunar is." Neit sighed. "I don't really hate you. Just... I'm not used to this kind of thing. I know how important it is but... I feel silly."

"Don't." Leal said. "It's to save us. As the priestess said, it's your power we need."

"Would it make ye feel better if I told ya I thought about it when I first saw ya?" the fox asked. He gave an encouraging grin, sitting up a bit. Neit laughed lightly.

"Neph, you are stuck on the ocean for weeks at a time with Kaji barking orders at you. If you did not think about that when you saw me, I would have to be very offended." Neit scooted closer to him. "So, you are really okay with this?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'm a bit nervous, but I guess that's expected." He pulled one of his large ears a bit, a sign of his nervousness.

"Can I touch?" she asked, reaching for that tugged large fox ear. Neph grinned a bit, going scarlet over his muzzle. Leal watched quietly as the pair softened a bit against each other. The guard had never just watched people in an intimate situation. Would it be better if he were not watching? He could turn and watch over the water, the way Kaji was doing. Even considering this, he stayed right where he was. He decided to himself that it was because he wanted to watch an essence drawing being done without being blinded by pleasure himself. The fox grinned at Neit's request to touch his ears.

"You've been wantin' to since you saw them, haven't ya?" he laughed. Neit pounced the fox suddenly, mashing him back against the raft and tweaking those large fuzzy ears softly. She grinned joyfully, seeming to find some special joy in it. She rubbed them between her fingers and thumbs sweetly for half a minute or so.

"They are so soft!" she laughed. "Okay, now that I have gotten that out of my way, what is it you like?" she asked, staying straddled on the fox's hips. "I suppose it's fair I ask. The more I make you happy, the better this will help us." Neph blushed a bit more as Leal watched the moment unfold.

"I like m' ears touched." He whispered, making Neit take her turn at blushing, her short tan fur dappled with dew from the persistent fog all around

them. Neit cast a glance over to Lunaris, who was sitting with his legs crossed beside Ceriss. She narrowed her eyes. He rolled his eyes back at her and moved over to the edge of the raft, turning and putting his feet in the water. He spoke softly to Kaji.

“Is this the farthest you’ve ever been from Diera in this direction, you think?” he asked. This captain was somewhat unorthodox, it would not have surprised Leal if his answer was in the negative on that. But he nodded.

“Aye, it certainly is. I reckon maybe it’s farther than anyone I’ve heard about ever coming back, but them that went before don’t have a Letai priestess with them, now do they? We might be just fine. I don’t know where we will end up, but if we get to land, we can worry about what comes next later.”

The two captains spoke quietly back and forth about places that they had visited and the places they wanted to see, seeming to have more in common than Leal had originally suspected, but that was good for keeping them occupied to let Neit relax a little. She looked up to him, and he expected an insistence to turn around as well, but she just smiled instead and leaned down over the pinned male vulpine and took a tip of his ear in her mouth, suckling it as her hands spread out over his chest, his body arching up at her as he whispered softly,

“Sweet essence...” The guard looked at his commander and the other wolf, but neither turned to peek. It seemed that, for now, they were going to give that pair their privacy. Ceriss rested a fingertip in the water, correcting the course of that little craft as it followed a current for a bit. She was focusing mostly on drawing essence, it seemed. Leal could understand. She had a lot taken out of her to save everyone the way she did.

“You are doing fine, Neit.” Ceriss encouraged. She leaned down and kissed along the rim of one of those ears and then leaned back up, crossing her arms in front of her and stripping her blouse upward in a quick and efficient manner. Her smallish breasts were certainly nothing like the more voluptuous Ceriss, but her youth and perkiness made up for that. And the fox was certainly not about to complain, given that he was the intended recipient of that view. Leal was not certain why he was allowed this view, aside from the fact that he had saved Neit before. It seemed fair that he should watch her save him back.

“Kin I touch?” the fox asked in a similar fashion to the thief’s own query. There was a slow nod from Neit as she leaned down into the palms of the exploring vulpine, his ears splayed somewhat dopily as he took twin teats between fingertips and squeezed and pulled gentle and sensual. Neit tilted her head back, her jaw going slack in a sweet ‘ooh’ as the smaller fox explored her. She was easily the smallest out of Alps’ friends, so it was interesting seeing her with someone smaller than her. Leal wondered, as he watched, whether she was attracted to that at all, or if it made her feel more comfortable than she might

otherwise have been. She began a slow, caressing roll of her thighs, stroking the fox through the canvas trousers that he wore. They were likely feeling a little snug on him, the guard considered as he watched Ceriss close her eyes and lay a hand on the vulpine's thigh.

"Nnhh!" Neph gasped a little as the priestess caressed him. The wolf atop him, small though she might have been to Leal, overpowered the fox easily enough, pushing herself over him and finally kissing him deeply. Leal had not figured the somewhat selfish Neit as a kisser, but she did so quite passionately. The craft rocked ever so slightly with a few more insistent motions of lupine hips upon happy fox thighs. Ceriss slipped a hand up from his hip and undid the ties to his trousers. It seemed that she was interested in cutting through the teasing and getting to the energy that she needed.

"This is great, Neit... he's young, and even for a fox he's got lots of essence. It's positively boiling off of him..." Ceriss was careful to encourage Neit and remind her that what she was doing was helping everyone. She seemed not to care as much about that by that point. As a rather thick, well-endowed fox was freed of his trousers, she rocked back a little to take in the view of him, and snared him in her fingers away from the priestess. The following interaction was not really complicated. She stroked him up and down fondly as Neph moved his own hands around to unfasten her shorts. She shimmied out of them, seeming loathe letting go of that captured phallus, but ultimately leaving herself bade before him. Neph murmured sultrily,

"Neit, you are very beautif-AaAh!" He was cut off as her head dropped and oral heat overtook his sea-fog dampened pink flesh. Leal grinned a bit at how he arched and spread his toes.

"Poor fox. Been on the open sea long?" Ceriss asked. She was extremely comfortable with what was going on, since this was a task she was used to doing herself. How often had she drawn energy in tense situations like this? Was it all that common? Were Letai lives so hard?

"Not a lot of wolf girls lookin' for foxes these days." Kaji chuckled a bit at his observation. "I've seen 'em looking, but they never approach, and this one's a bit on the shy side, you understand." Ceriss smiled.

"Ah, I see. How long then, Neph?" she asked.

"Ah... I... Nhnn.." He arched again as Neit slid her mouth up that turgid flesh slowly, tongue likely grinding heavily on his more sensitive surfaces. Leal was actually kind of surprised that Neit wanted to do this to the fox. Did she not observe some kind of species taboo? He did not think that it was a problem, but he wondered if the girl ever did. Had she thought at any point that she would be treating Neph like this? Had she ever considered even meeting a fox before she

met Neph? Leal could not help but be aroused watching this. Would Ceriss let him relieve the pressure, or have him hold it so she could draw from him later? That seemed a bit torturous.

“How long, Neph?” Neit asked tenderly. She seemed curious at that too.

“N... Not since I left th’ islands.” The fox panted. Kaji assisted.

“That would be about six years.” The captain sucked a breath in through his teeth. “Man I should scoot a little further back from this.” He moved off toward the corner of the raft, Lunar is laughing a bit.

“I...” The fox tried to speak again, panting hotly.

“Don’t stop, Neit.” Ceriss crooned softly, her hand on the fox’s hip glowing again, this time a beautiful blue color. Was it always different?

“He’ll pop, Ceriss.” Neit whispered, holding his tip at her lips and stroking him gingerly in her hand to stave it off as best she could.

“And you will keep going. He’ll be fine.” Ceriss seemed to know what she was doing.

“Aaahh!” the fox whined softly, plaintive, begging. Neit nodded and pushed her mouth back down over the vulpine’s shaft. He was enough to fill two of her hands one on top of the other, so he actually seemed to be the perfect proportion for Neit. Neit stroked him only a few more times in her mouth before issuing a deep, guttural moan around his flesh, eyes closing as the fox shook heavily, legs slipping upward, feet planting on the raft as his tail flitted about rapidly. Leal felt a rush of heat through his own body as he heard Neit’s throat contract hard several times, then watched her gasp a bit, a small flood of overflow spilling down the fox’s heavy sack as he shook. Her mouth sealed around him again and she continued to longingly work him in her tight muzzle. Oversensitive seconds later, the fox began giving panicked twittering giggling, mind short circuiting and not sure how to address the situation, it seemed. Neit popped her muzzle off of him, grinning and stroking him even as he wriggled beneath her, his body hard to control as she slipped back on top of him, settling her hips over his lap. Her tan-colored bare form made her seem a little more fox-like if it were not for her smaller ears and tail. She was a pretty good match for him as far as size.

“This is very good, Neit, keep going, don’t let him rest... I want your pleasure to mix with his. That’s what will really work.” Ceriss’ words were calm and endearing, as if she were training a dear student to her.

“Nhnhn!” the poor vulpine arched, and Leal tingled all over as he watched Neit push her tight channel right down over his twitching cock, seeing every inch sink into her with a single hard grinding stroke, his sack drawing tight again briefly as if erupting immediately all over again. He panted freely, making it seem that had not happened. It was perhaps just intense pleasure. He placed his hands on her rump and pulled her tight to him, feet planting as he pushed her up a bit. She growled deeply as she pushed hard onto him several times, making a very hot show of it, back arched, teeth bared, ears back. She began to relentlessly grind him, and Leal was immediately aware of a violet tint to the energy around Ceriss’ hand. Her natural color. Leal could see the difference there. Neit made it so that the Priestess was renewing her own energy directly. He considered for a moment that pleasure was a very fortunate fashion that the Letai could renew their essence, and then he considered the fact that eating was used to renew the body, and eating good food was a pleasant experience, so why should renewing essence not also be nice? It seemed natural at least. He writhed a bit in need as he watched. Oh how he would like to just slip over the lovely dark lady wolf on the raft and renew his eager gift to her again, but he would wait.

Neit, however, saw no purpose in waiting. She rocked her hips harder, building up a nice breeding pace with the fox. The raft began to pitch a little, shaking with the force of her motions, even as light and small as they both were.

“I have to admit, I’m a little envious.” Kaji mentioned, breaking from his intentionally banal conversation with Lunaris.

“You get yours often enough, I bet, owning your own ship and all.” He laughed.

“Yeah, more than the fox. He deserves this. Hard worker. Whiney little bitch sometimes, but at least this is one thing he won’t whine about again for a while.” There was a louder laugh from Lunaris.

“Uhhn, I... I...” The vulpine whimpered out again.

“Yes! Do it, Neph! Inside me!” barked Neit. She lowered her head, slapping her thighs against his harder, determined.

“Ahhnn! I want you t’... I want you...” he panted out raspily.

“I’ll cum, just fill me, fox! Stop fighting it!” Neit was pretty vulgar in her demand, and Leal only felt painfully aroused from that. Neph bucked hard, and then growled loudly as he obviously erupted. Neit slapped her thighs harder on him, squeaking out a few times, and then shuddering hard, a sinking groan announcing the success of her own pleasure. Ceriss crooned happily, her entire body bathed in a brighter violet glow. The captain and general were both turned

to look over their shoulder at Neit as she peaked. They could not deny themselves that beautiful site.

“Oh, that’s what essence looks like?” asked Kaji, apparently able to see the essence because of how bright it was glowing during the exchange. Leal squirmed achingly as he watched Neit slightly open her eyes and stare right into his own, a hungry, drunk, happy expression tantalizing and seductive. Then, rather suddenly, she slipped forward, the fox’s pink member slapping his belly wetly, a little pool of his own release matting his fur in his lap as Neit pulled Lunaris’ borrowed jacket up and her muzzle pushed deftly, easily right into Leal’s lap, her mouth snaring his tip, all she really needed to send waves of pleasure screaming through the guard’s core.

“Hey, that’s royal property!” exclaimed Lunaris jovially. It was unclear if he was speaking of the jacket, or the guard.

“Phk yuu...” came the muffled announcement from his lap. Leal slapped his hands behind him and he looked desperately at Ceriss. She had not said he could do this. Her hand went to his thigh, just as it had been on the fox, her eyes half open, her tail wagging slowly as she watched the somewhat pleasure-desperate wolf girl take on the grey and charcoal-furred guard. He winced a little as her mouth pushed back and forth lustfully over his aching shaft. Leal closed his eyes, surprised, but happy at this turn of events. He was so aroused he was hurting, and this was very much appreciated. He watched one of Ceriss’ hands slip over the fox’s shaft, stroking him slowly, making him squirm, then move back to Neit’s puffy hot sex and run her fingers in and out of her, making a bit of a mess of the soup of life that spilled from her as she penetrated her with three fingers that way.

“Uh...” The captain of the now ocean-bottom-dwelling ship seemed to want to comment, but words escaped him. Ceriss’ hand went back and forth from the lady wolf to her fox companion, working him over with her slick juices, stroking him and making a nice show of it for herself. Leal was barely able to focus, but it seemed that with a little energy back in her system, she was able to enjoy this herself a bit. There was nothing wrong with that. He groaned deeply as Neit wrapped her hand around his girth. He was larger than the fox, and she seemed interested in using hand and mouth both on him. Her tongue was furiously busy too. She seemed to know quite well how to tend him in this way, and it surprised him less that the fox lasted less than a full minute with it, if it really had been so long for him.

Ceriss pumped the fox as he squirmed on his back through it all for a few minutes, getting him nicely riled up again before she rather abruptly stopped. He got onto his knees behind Neit and the wolf girl whined loudly as, with a mouth full of Leal’s intimate flesh, she was taken rather roughly by a once again willing vulpine. He was fast and frantic with his motions, and those motions only carried

through the girl's body. The illicit nature of sharing her like that only drove Leal higher. He leaned forward, cupping the sides of Neit's head as he grunted out loudly and spent his hot essence all over the back of her tongue and into her throat, feeling it contract greedily around his tip as he twitched with each hard pulse of his seed. He arched back in his eruption and the glow for Ceriss went brighter.

Neit popped off of his girth and threw her head back, panting in pleasure as Neph drove himself into her from behind. Her tail pinned to her back with his hand as he had pulled it up out of the way. She lowered her head as Leal sat back again, feeling light-headed and spent. He realized, coming out of the fog of want, that it made more sense to conserve his strength as they needed to last as long as they could on the open sea with no water, but the temptation had been too much. Still, he had trouble regretting it right at that moment.

"Come on, Neph, leave a little for later, lad!" his captain barked. He grunted with frustration, likely feeling the burn in his muscles making it harder to get what he was obviously very much after. He rose up on his feet, leaning over her body even as she sloped herself with her chest to the shattered deck of the ship that had gone down. The whole platform shook with his frantic motions. Lunaris commented in a hushed tone to Kaji,

"Captain, it would be sad indeed if we survived that storm only to sink because of frantic fox-pounding." Kaji covered his mouth and had to fight not to laugh. Finally, the pistoning, shaking fox grunted loudly just as Neit wailed a plaintive, echoless tone out into the fog. Her convulsing inner flesh likely did all that was needed as the fox gave a hot little squeak, then just lowered onto his knees behind the wolf and groaned a few times, hugging her hips close.

"I suppose there's none left for the rest of us?" Kaji asked the Priestess, who shook softly, arm glowing brightly. She flashed a grin to the captain and growled softly,

"You help us make it to shore, and I will ensure that you don't need a companion for weeks." Kaji widened his eyes. "Letai are *trained* to do what is pleasurable." Leal nodded to that.

"It's true. You won't be able to sleep for a while with those thoughts and memories coming back to you in the night." The guard grinned to his commanding officer. Lunaris arched a brow at that. Leal grinned at his captain, and the fox just fell back onto the planks, wheezing, twitching, and thanking the very fog itself as he steamed from the heated release with the quietly wagging lady wolf who panted just as happily from the flood she'd been given. The priestess sat up and stroked Neit's head.

“See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” She grinned at the wolf, who rolled over and lay beside the vulpine, pulling her trousers over her lap and just letting them rest to keep her a tiny bit modest.

“Never thought it would be. Nicer than I hoped though. The fox is so cute with all the little sounds he makes. I had fun.” She chuckled.

“Good girl, Neit. You are very helpful. I will move us along faster for a bit. You rest, then you take him again. And no taking Leal! I may need him later, you greedy girl.” Leal and Neit both blushed hotly at that.

“You can borrow the ship’s captain if you want.” Neit looked up at him and giggled.

“You got your promise from Ceriss. She will take care of you. I’ve got what I want.” She reached over and stroked Neph’s ears, making him quiver and sigh. Leal found himself feeling rather good about the result, even if the circumstances which caused it were particularly tragic. Neit might well have gotten a good friend in the deal.

There was a lull in activity as Ceriss moved the group quickly, enough that they felt the wind over their ears. That really had given her a new energy. She seemed a lot more cheerful and positive, despite how hopeless the situation seemed. The day wore on and conversation drifted from subject to subject as the group just tried to keep Ceriss awake. As much as her essence energy was recharged, she had not slept in well over 36 hours. Neit even snuggled up to her occasionally and pampered her to make her feel better, but lack of water was taking its toll the most.

It was Kaji who finally realized that the fog made it so that his shirt was wet when the raft was pushed along. He widened his eyes and laughed.

“Hey guys, watch!” He twisted his shirt and collected a nice mouth full of water. This led to the nearly broken crew holding their garments up and waving them around wildly in the fog to try to get as much dew on them as possible. Leal had no clothing, but he borrowed Kaji’s shirt on the second pass and gave water to a grateful Ceriss. Lunariss took off his own shirt and Neit used her blouse. After a good hour of this activity, they seemed to all feel a little more lively. When the fog went away, they would not have that ability, but they might at least be able to know where they were going. They had bought a little more time. That might be exactly all they needed!

Mytan arrived at nearly midnight. Vhale had been prepared to collect a bet he'd made with Luna, and grumbled a bit when the soft footfalls of the approaching guard were heard. He came around the stand of trees and then went right up and onto the river boat. Alps greeted him there with a bow, feeling good that his mother's choice to let him go was vindicated.

"Nice to see you again." Alps stated. Mytan panted and related his findings from town.

"You and someone else were the only ones anyone saw. Not a group. I didn't say anything about there being more of you, but you must know... they are talking. They are playing you up like some hero who killed a bunch of Uruk a while back and have come back to clean house on the corrupt Silverlight." Mytan's assessment was not entirely factual, but he did kill some Uruk in the valley to the north east with Azia that time. It might be seen as heroic if that got out, but he had thought that it was seen as an entirely Silverlight action. He did not understand that his name was ever attached to it. He suddenly wondered if Tia might have been responsible for that.

"You were delayed?" Luna asked, coming up behind Alps. Mytan took a long, hard look at her. She was solid white, like Alps, and the family resemblance was there. Perhaps having family did not go with what he'd been told about the wolf. Mytan nodded.

"The mines are empty, the entrances will be sealed, they said. But there was a lot of stress relief going on. Parties, often right out in the street, dancing, instruments, food, more ale than I have seen that town break out for anything. I had trouble getting out of there without being seen." Mytan shrugged and moved around the boat, addressing three solid posts where the craft was carefully moored. He began unwinding the rope. "Is your lot ready to go?" Alps nodded.

"I think the Asuna are asleep, but the rest of us are up and about. I will let them know we are leaving." Alps assisted in getting the rope pulled up, and then went back onto the boat to let everyone know that they were on their way. Luna was already discussing it with Nidaja and Lira, who were dining in the galley. Nita was sipping some wine that was found on board, and rested in a deep, lavishly cushy chair. Alps felt a rush of joy seeing her like that. Yes, this was how the queen, his beloved, should be travelling. No more fighting with Uruk, close brushes with death, and sleeping in the dirt. There might be more of that later, but at least for a bit they could travel together in relative comfort.

Nita looked up as Alps arrived and pulled her cowl back up. She then lowered it again, seeing that it was her lover. Alps touched his head in indication.

"Mytan's back, might want to – " Nita got it back up just in time to see the young guard enter the room.

“Alright, you...” he pointed to Alps. “I need you in the boiler room, before we drift back into the docks.”

“What?” Nita asked.

“It’s a steam ship. We move by burning the black-stone.” He pointed at Alps. “Those are servant’s colors, right?” He made note of the outfit the former slave was wearing. Yellow trim on black uniform. He was observant, and quite right.

“I can’t have him toiling in the – “ Nita started with an indignant tone.

“It’s alright, I can do it. Lyat can switch out with me when he wakes up.” Alps stated. Nita frowned. Alps realized that if she made a big deal of a marked servant not being a servant it would make the nature of their identity even more suspicious. However he looked, he had to play the part. Besides, he had worked hard for years; this would not be so different.

“I will have him relieve you as soon as he wakes then.” The queen was keeping her voice soft so as not to seem too authoritative, obviously getting why Alps was alright with the arrangement. The white servant moved down into the center of the ship, almost half under the waterline, finding that there was a room there lined in steel, made to be sure no fire could kindle and spread. There was a small glow in the round basin which held another basin above it, copper and heavy with a rounded bottom. Two extensions that appeared like flat pans ran downward and alongside the boiler, as plates for shallow pools of water that would boil quickly with the given heat. There was water in there, from what Alps understood.

“Keep the fire from getting too hot by dumping more black-stone in and closing the damper here. To heat it up, let the black-stone light up, and open the damper. Pull this chain to use the blower to really get it heated up. This bar here will go up and down with the temperature. You want it to stay in the blue marked area...” The guard who knew more than he should about the boat showed Alps what to do. There were a few other details about boiler pressure and the like that the emerald Amanian tried to go over. Alps was a quick study and after a few moments proved he knew what to do. The emerald lupine then returned to the control deck to pilot the ship, and Alps, at the sound of a loud whistle from on deck, began putting in more black-stone and pulled the blower several times.

The wolf immediately realized his shirt was going to have to come off. He removed it and began using the shovel until the temperature gauge was right, and the steam pressure gage began bouncing up and down the way Mytan said it would. Alps carefully adjusted the damper to control the temperature, being reserved enough in how he applied black-stone to not have to add more to

control the heating of the water. He felt the ship begin to move, and turn, and then, in minutes, they were on their way. Alps panted, a bit uncomfortably warm already, but it made him feel good to actually do some work to trade off for the queen's safety and comfort. This was a world he knew.

He did not know it alone for long. Nidaja showed up and crossed her arms as she watched the shirtless wolf work. Alps was quiet as he pulled the blower again, then opened up the damper a bit. Nidaja's cowl was up, but her armor was visible.

"You learned fast. The stand in captain sent me down here to tell you that you could do this as long as you like. He's got a good constant control pressure. It's really an amazing ship, Alps. I worry that we will draw attention to ourselves on it, but Vhale is right. We will move faster, perhaps, and that will give us an advantage. Yes, we might make a scene as we go, but we will get to our destination hopefully long before that scene is common knowledge." Alps smiled and panted out,

"Nita was sitting comfortably in a state room in the fore of the boat. I saw her there. She looks pretty here. I like that she gets to travel like this for now." Alps shoveled a little more black-stone and closed the blower a little more. He was ever watchful of the gauges. This was entirely different from anything he'd ever done, but at the same time, it was work, and work he knew. Being exact and not messing up were critical things he lived with for so long that he was a natural for this task.

"Alps, did you see the fox on board?" Nidaja spoke softly.

"Ellis? No, I haven't seen her since Luca." He leaned back against a railing away from the fire, letting it moderate itself a bit.

"I saw her on top of the boat. I thought she had left with the crystals or something, since those are gone, but I think she's still with us." Nidaja made it obvious this caused a little discomfort. Ellis was a killer. It was not known just what kind of killer she was. Alps understood the discomfort, and picked up a water-skin and drank from it a bit to cool himself. Nidaja seemed to take great pleasure in watching him work hard like that.

"I think she will stay with us unless I tell her outright to leave, and even then I can't promise she will. She had her reasons, and fortunately those reasons seem to involve keeping me alive. She was very cross with me for getting in such trouble." Alps drank again. It was refreshing, not just the water, the needing it from hard work.

"Telling me that comforts me a little. If she wants you to live, that is not a bad thing to me." Nidaja leaned in and kissed Alps nose, self-consciously looking

around to make sure Mytan was not spying on them. But of course he could not be. He was piloting the ship. The general watched her lover work a bit longer and then spoke softly, "We won't be able to hide the truth forever from the guard. Mytan's not an idiot. He might have been misused, but he is sharp enough. Do you think you can learn to pilot the ship if we need to... replace him?" Alps did not like the connotation there.

"I get this on a basic level, but if we have a problem here, I do not know that even he knows how to fix it. He's not the owner or the normal operator, he said. We need him if we can keep him. We just have to hope we can be sure of his allegiances. We should tell him sooner rather than later."

"He will not be able to pilot endlessly, of course, so when we moor to let him sleep, we can have a little meeting and let him know what he's gotten into. But I must warn you, if he flakes out, I will allow Reika to escort him off the ship." Nidaja nodded as she said that. Alps cringed.

"As you said, he's smart. I think that he will know his best option for survival is not to cross the royal house." Alps added a little more black-stone. Not much.

"You think so? Because if he is intelligent and gets some inkling where we are headed, he will be smart enough to know that we are dramatically reducing his chances for survival. Then it comes back down to loyalty." Alps fanned himself a bit.

"He's a town guard. All of them swear to protect the queen and uphold her laws. I think he will still do that. He might have been working for the Silverlight, but he seemed to have no love for what they were doing." Alps pulled the blower chain a few more times.

"Alps, you are very trusting. We love you for that, but don't let it put those you love in danger. Be vigilant." Nidaja bowed and headed back up to the deck, probably to keep an eye on the motion of the river boat. It steamed along at a decent pace and Alps worked for several more hours in the heat. Alps looked up at the ceiling of his little room in the heat and the scent of burning.

"I trust that you will be watchful, Nidaja... But I know that someone else is watching too, and if he seems like he will harm us or stop us... You may never know what happened to him." He sighed.

Alps watched the fire flicker for a while in the belly of the boat, always mystified by how fire glowed the way it did. He was left alone with his thoughts for a bit as he considered what Nidaja had told him. He did not want to feel distrusting. He did not want to suspect that everyone he met would harm him. He was a good person. At least, he felt he was. That should count for

something. But then again, perhaps he was too trusting, and at the very least needed his friends to protect him from his trusting nature if he got too relaxed. He didn't know that he could ever be as guarded as Nidaja was.

"Make no mistake." Ellis' voice startled Alps, as it always did. Nidaja had been right; she was here on the ship after all. "I don't just randomly kill the people you come in contact with." Alps narrowed his eyes.

"No? It's just a coincidence that the people opposing us end up buried?" He was still very angry with Ellis, how could he not be? Killing didn't seem to bother her at all; she didn't seem to care at all for a light-handed and subtle approach to their problems. She moved closer to him, eyes seeming almost to gleam in the dimness of the room.

"Your attempts to keep your hands clean are futile in this." She said quietly, calmly. "You cannot hesitate when your companions may be endangered. They rely on you to be stronger than you have been and you cannot leave their lives to chance. You must fight and you must survive."

Alps felt his anger rising. All she seemed to do was lecture him after doing something he didn't approve of. His fingers tightened around the shovel as he added more black-stone to the fire, gritting his teeth, silently fuming a moment. He finally spoke again.

"Can you at least consult me before you kill someone?" This request seemed reasonable at least, if the mark of his passage was going to be killings he was not responsible for. The fox crossed her arms.

"Would you have given me permission to kill Chana? Would you have given me permission to kill Enna, even while you were awaiting your own execution?" Alps didn't think much before he answered that.

"No." He replied solidly, gritting his teeth a little.

"Then why would I consult with you?"

"Because I told you to." he said defiantly. "Because this journey is hard enough without knowing that you are leaving slaughtered Amanian bodies rotting in the sun in our wake!" His voice rose as he said this, fairly shouting at that last part.

The fox just stared at him, her face stern. She seemed to be studying him. "Do not presume to give me orders my boy, and do not attempt to meddle in *my* duties."

"And what *is* your duty? What are you even trying to do!? You are making me into a pariah! When all this is done I want people to generally find strength and joy in what I have done, not fear my continued wrath!" he barked, losing control for just a moment. "If you're so capable and so skilled, why haven't you just taken care of everything already instead of playing on my sympathies?"

Ellis scowled. There it was again, that look of sharp disappointment in her eyes. He didn't understand why it bothered him so much to see it, but he felt almost as bad as he might if Nita or Luna wore it instead. She spoke in a darker tone.

"You are caught up in a grand scheme, Aris, and you are poised to play a pivotal role, everyone here is, and you know it. To believe that what you need to do could be done without bloodshed is... foolish at best. Consider your queen and the army her general commands. Would you have them march weaponless, armed with good intentions and the trust of others?"

"I would not have them march at all if there were any other way." He replied tersely. "That's how we are different. I would do what I could to find another way. I have seen enough suffering without sending people needlessly to die." He turned his back to shovel more black-stone and immediately regretted having said it. It practically insulted what Nita and Nidaja were forced to do all the time. The fox spoke again, her voice pure and clear, but certainly not soothing.

"Your innocence is endearing, but your naivety will be fatal. Heed your general. Be vigilant. Be strong. Wake up, Aris." She said, turning away from him.

"Stop being so vague!" he said, frustrated. "I need you to..." He turned to face her only to find out that she was gone. Of course she was. Standing at the doorway was Lyat, already shirtless with his spots looking like soot from the black-stone. He seemed more than happy to be there despite giving Alps a curious look at his mis-aimed statement. He nodded.

"Asuna is intending to be giving wolf a break. Wolf is showing Lyat how now." His voice was deep but gentle. Alps sighed.

"Yes, of course..." He spent some time showing Lyat just that. The Asuna had a little more trouble learning the basics, but it was mostly because of a language barrier. He managed to finally get it across, but knew he would want to check up on him from time to time so he could make sure that he was not forgetting anything. It was not hard, but it was even more out of Lyat's element than his own.

After getting the Asuna started and observing him for a good half hour, he wandered back upstairs, finding Nita and Nidaja and Luna in the galley.

“Well, this is a torturous sight.” Nita said softly.

“I’ve worked harder than this before. I’m fine.” Alps explained.

“You misunderstand the kind of torture.” Luna stated with a grin.

“Oh?” Alps took a seat at the table.

“You look rugged and handsome and so deliciously hard-working...” Nita leaned in and kissed her lover. The ship was drifting to a halt.

“We are stopping?” Alps asked.

“It will be dawn soon. The Asuna will act as our scouts and lookouts with Lira, and Mytan will sleep. I have asked for his audience here as soon as Reika gets the moorings done. We will stay in a sheltered part of this river with clear view north and south for the morning and leave again late afternoon.” Nita stated.

“We are going to tell him who we are?” asked the shirtless servant.

“Yes.” Nidaja rumbled. “We are far enough from town, and I should be able to judge by his reaction his feelings on travelling with us.”

“What about Luna?” Alps asked. He nodded to her.

“She is what we feel will guarantee his continued... support.” Nita stated, making the priestess grin. Alps rubbed his ear a bit as he considered this. He did not want to get more people involved. This was a case where they had no choice but to get someone heavily involved, and they needed to be able to move freely at least while on the boat, as it would be their refuge for a while. Nita shared her wine with Alps and gave him some fine cheese and bread that was already on the boat. The Silverlight were living lavishly off the blood and sweat of the town of Luca, and maybe others. The former slave was not really tired from the hard work, he was tired because he had not slept the previous night or the current night, so getting to stop work, and relax with his love, that was something hard for his body to ignore. He almost dozed off against Nita before Mytan wandered down into the galley.

“I could keep going a bit longer if you need me too, but I think this is a good place to rest.” He said as he cleared the door. Nita and Nidaja both looked up to him with a casual expression. He froze. Mytan was not even breathing.

“Have a seat. We need to talk.” Nita stated calmly. He did not move.

“Mytan Shuraza.” Nidaja commanded clearly. “Sit down with us.” He was not moving. Alps folded his ears back.

“You are not in trouble. We need your help.” Alps spoke up finally, realizing what the emerald Aமான might be thinking, seeing the queen there on a boat that he had piloted for a group of traitors and murderers. Of course all of them had died quickly in the courtyard if the queen herself was involved. Now this guard would have to answer for it. He shook his head, and gasped, as if just realizing he had stopped breathing.

“I swear, I did not know what they were doing.” The ship’s temporary pilot walked shakily over to the table but could not bring himself to sit right there between the queen and general. “We understood from royal decree that we were in cooperation with the Silverlight... Then Enna came with a decree from Nita Razelle. You didn’t really send Enna did you?” He looked to the queen. She shook her head.

“I did not. She was planted by the Silverlight. Some within that group appear to be cooperating with someone outside of it, possibly even the dark one himself to make an arrangement similar to what the Asuna have... slavery to the dark one in exchange for not being wiped off the map completely.” Mytan looked horrified. “The Sons of Sorrow.” He lowered his head. “Had I known who you were, I would have told you about it sooner.” He seemed fearful that he might still have to face repercussions for his actions. Nidaja spoke up, a little louder.

“Stop worrying, Mytan. Whatever you feel you might have done wrong before now can be corrected by the help you are giving us. We cannot tell you what we are doing, but you will be in charge of getting us to Lake Frostpelt. But for us to travel effectively, we cannot hide from you who we are. You have to know so we can act freely on the boat, and fight freely if we have to. You are hereby sworn to complete secrecy about all that you see or hear while in our company.” Mytan nodded emphatically.

“On my family’s honor and to the death, you have my word.” He nodded at that.

“It will need to be longer than to your death.” Luna stated.

“I can’t tell anyone anything after I am dead.” He stated this with some level of distress.

“Swear it.” Luna stated coldly.

“I swear.” He nodded. “So then... Who are you?” he asked. He shook his head at that. “No... I mean, I know who you and the general are, of course, but the rest of them... Why you travel with the Asuna, all that...” The emerald

Amanian leaned forward to listen. "I know who Lira is... The forest Spirit... She's helped my family in a couple of expeditions, but the rest..."

"Well, obviously..." Nita spoke up, "I am Queen Razelle. This is Nidaja Razelle, so we are being completely open about it, no assumptions. This..." she indicated Alps. "Is Alps, he is my chosen life mate." Shuraza looked suddenly horrified, his violet eyes going round.

"You didn't know before you had me working, and I'd have done it anyway. It needs to be done, and we are on this journey together. The queen herself would shovel black-stone for this mission." Alps stated this flatly. This did not really seem to comfort Mytan very much, but he looked back to Nita.

"Right, no worries about that. He grew up as a slave in the town that is now your home." She had such an adoring tone when she spoke of him that Mytan surely could not deny what Alps was now.

"He grew up a slave, but that's certainly not what he ever was." Luna chimed in this time, seeming pretty stern about it. She was not happy that Alps had lived in such a way, and made it well known. She looked over to Nita, who nodded to her.

"And who are you?" asked the uneasy Mytan.

"This will be easier to show you rather than tell you." Luna stated. She stood up, held out her hand and murmured, "Istamir Letai Hurista Perenistatireldastah Luna..." And with that, white ribbons of light erupted around the priestess and swirled as if captured in underwater currents, winding their way to a suddenly paralyzed Mytan. They stroked his cheeks and chest, and he arched, as if in mind-numbing pleasure, mouth agape. Her eyes, violent and green, glowed brightly. "There can be no mistake in what you feel and see. Know this, and know why your secret must be kept beyond the grave, if need be Mytan. You are, for a time, involved in something that the Shuraza have likely dreamed of for generations." The ribbons withdrew and faded away, leaving the emerald Amanian male slumped back in his chair, shaking. Nita spoke again, delicately.

"The Asuna are representatives of their empire, sent by Rios Dominis to help protect us on this dangerous journey, a show of peace that will be a lasting alignment once this is done. They... They..." Mytan was staring directly forward, unblinking, slow shallow breaths.

"I guess Lira was right about him. He seems a little shocked." Nidaja spoke softly. A tear rolled down the unblinking, unspeaking Mytan's cheek. Luna looked over to the others gathered and murmured soothingly,

“Perhaps you can leave him with me. I think I need to give him a little bit of time to ... get his head around this. I had not really realized that the Letai were held in this high regard by anyone so long after we failed to save Hurosmir from the dark one.” She moved into a chair right by Mytan. “Can you hear me?” the white lady wolf asked.

“Alps... Come... You need to rest. It’s been a hard few days.” Nita took her lover’s hand. Alps nodded as he watched his mother lean in and touch her muzzle to the paralyzed Mytan. Alps gritted his teeth. She wouldn’t.

“I am going to head to bed myself, I get the next watch shift when Reika and Lyat are done. I will make sure that Lyat’s not still down there shoveling black-stone. Mytan was supposed to take care of that, but he’s a little out of it. Luna...”

“Mmhh?” she murmured sweetly, running her cool nose-pad on the still unmoving Mytan’s ear.

“Yeah, get him to relax a bit. We will see you when we get up.” With that Alps was led from the room. Surely his mother would not be thinking of just being intimate with the helpless member of the Shuraza family. That had to be ethically wrong somehow, even though his understanding of how the Shuraza clan felt about the Letai would suggest he’d like that. He has a special someone, right? Was Luna considering what? What was she really going to do? Alps suddenly wanted to stay, but Nita was pretty insistent that he sleep. It had been a long and hard few days. It was time to rest. He allowed himself to be led to the Queen’s bed for the first time in a very long time.

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 15

Luna looked into the seemingly unseeing eyes of Mytan Shuraza. She was flattered that her people still held such reverence, and she felt that perhaps it was now misplaced, but at the same time she could not help but be a little endeared. She also found some excitement in what she felt from Mytan when those ribbons of light, a connection to her own essence, stroked him. The emerald male's own essence practically exploded from him. There is pleasure from a lover which Luna was well aware of and of course that excitement if one has not seen their lover in a while; Luna had always favored that kind of essence, but this was something that she could not remember ever encountering.

Mytan revered her in a way that made her very touch a completely spiritual experience for him. Her presence kindled his essence into a wildfire that might have been visible at a distance to even the most novice trained Letai initiate. She did not feel selfish about wanting to draw upon him. She needed power for things which were to come, and no one on the boat was likely to yield more than he would in his current state.

"Mytaaaaann..." Luna whispered.

"Luna... High Priestess Luna..." He squeaked out, a tear rolling down his cheek again. "The Letai still live..." The priestess pulled Mytan's somewhat cushy table-chair to face her and slipped down on her knees to look up into his eyes as he had let his head drop some, keeping her lovely face in clear view.

"No, Mytan... We were wiped out. None remained for a very long time. The one you met, Alps... He has the ability to fetch us from the darkness. He alone." She wanted to make absolutely sure that Mytan never saw her son as a servant or a slave again. How could a mother be more proud of her son than she was of her Aris? Mytan seemed to snap out of his trance a little, another tear still rolling down his cheek. He was still reeling from this most capital of revelations.

"Alps... did that?" he asked. Luna nodded slowly. "I... I certainly cannot blame her royal highness for taking him as her mate then."

"She took him as her mate when she thought he was a slave, Mytan. Alps is a good person even without the power he holds." Luna stroked Mytan's face,

and he suddenly held her hands against his chest, pulling them down just a little, seeming startled, as if just becoming aware that she was touching him.

“How did he get such power? He’s not even an emerald Amanian. He’s got white fur...” he paused. “Just like you...” Luna smiled in her calm and motherly way and replied.

“He was Shadowfallen when I was, Mytan. Alps is my son. He gained the power while in the Shadowfall. Around the time you’d have been born, he escaped. He didn’t have a clear memory of that place, as he was still a child when he slipped free. Confused and alone, he ended up in an orphanage. White fur being uncommon, no adoption was made and he became a slave.” Mytan nodded solemnly, seeming to understand how such a thing could happen.

“And he released you when he got older?” the emerald wolf asked. Luna smiled warmly and began to stroke his chest, feeling his heart racing, feeling his essence positively boiling around him. She didn’t even have to try to see it; she could feel the pressure of it, like a hot desert wind. She whispered to him.

“Yes... A little over a year ago now.” Luna leaned up and touched her nose to Mytan’s neck. His body stiffened.

“Are the Letai typically so affectionate?” he asked, seeming to feel he was unworthy of her attention. Luna had not expected this sort of challenge.

“Do you know where we get our essence from?” she asked. She heard a loud contraction of Mytan’s throat. He knew. At least, he knew what Luna might have been after.

“I’m just an Amanian. I’m no Letai. My essence is not...” Luna touched a finger to his lips.

“I felt your essence when the light you saw... that felt so nice... touched you.” She smiled with a doting gaze to him. She could not help but feel attracted to his essence, and he was not hard on the eyes anyway, his emerald fur well tended, his hair drawn back in a long, braided ponytail (which was likely forbidden to guards who were not likely to have the favor of regional matriarchs because of their family). His narrow, violet eyes suggested an origin of desert-clan before the mix with the Letai so many generations ago. His clothing, a white shirt, dark trousers and a red sash tied around his middle were simple but purposeful to represent his duties.

“That light... When you revealed what you were...” he whispered. That memory would be ingrained into him forever, to be certain.

“Where we go and what we do is dangerous... perilous, Mytan.” Luna whispered directly into his ear. “I need the energy you have. I can draw your strength, I can use it to help us, just as you have agreed to do. You will be the first of your clan in seven hundred years, if they even existed so long ago, to give the gift of your strength to the Letai... What we do may save the life of those you love... Of the town you call your home. Can you help me, Mytan?” Luna knew very well how to secure the assistance of those who were not Letai when it came to drawing power. Everyone naturally wanted pleasure, but many had reasons they could deny it to themselves. Those reasons often became moot when it became obvious that pleasure was not, for them in that moment, a selfish act. He would be helping. Luna would appreciate it. The Letai wanted him. He was important for the power he had, even if, typical to Emerald Amanian males, he had little use of that power. Luna could use that power. She could do wonderful things with that power. Not just the Letai, but the Queen herself, to who he swore his loyalty to the death, needed him, and he was being asked .

Mytan folded back his ears, his inhibitions melting away as he tilted his head slightly and pushed his warm mouth over Luna’s, kissing her long and slow. Luna wagged her tail sensually as she caressed the male’s flat tummy and chest tenderly with her fingertips, her tongue willfully pushing into his mouth. Mytan drew in a deep, sudden breath at the increase in intimacy. He pulled back, heart racing, head likely spinning from the intensity of this life-changing moment.

“What point... do you need to be to draw from me?” he asked, perhaps wondering how far Luna intended to go, fearful of offending her by expecting too much. Luna tilted his reverent head up a little to let him look into her visibly glowing eyes.

“I already am drawing from you, Mytan. I have been since I got down in front of you. You have a strong essence, perhaps just because of how happy you are to know that I exist and am here with you... But the more happiness I bring, the more of that essence I can tap into.” She touched her lips to his delicately, not wanting to push hard enough to startle him. He reciprocated, slipping his arms around Luna, as her chest rose a bit, pushing up to him as he leaned down and kissed her long and slow. His essence was not as strong as drawing from Alps, but it was certainly stronger than she’d seen with other Amanian males. Her back arched, eyes gazing up at him before moving her hands to the clasp that held on the top of her garment. His eyes widened as her robed unfurled around her, that proud motherly bosom presented to the unsuspecting Mytan openly.

“Every part of me screams at me that this is a dream.” He whispers. He seemed to hesitate in touching.

“Why do you pause, even if it might be a dream?” the priestess asked melodically. She enjoyed bedroom parlay.

“If it’s a dream, I fear I shall awaken with my fur bound to my bed-sheets, m’lady.” He made sure to sound polite and reverent, despite how intimate his reference was. The lady wolf slipped her hand down over his lap, her other pushing his chest back to make him lean back in his chair. There was a low and tense sound, a bit of resistance.

“You fear I shall request of you something which violates a previous promise?” Luna asked calmly. She was not unreasonable. The temptation of his essence was strong, but not so much that she would violate his convictions.

“It’s not like that. She’s not that kind of friend.” The guard and riverboat pilot swallowed loudly, his throat apparently going dry. “I had a friend in Jalana who went to work in Diera. His sister lives in Luca. I promised him I would look after her when I got here. I had to make sure she was okay. Maybe one day I will be that close to her, I might like that, but... For now...” He was lightly panting.

“But you are nervous...” the priestess whispered.

“How do I hope to please you? You are ...” He could not think of the words.

“To you I should have an impossible standard, I understand.” Luna whispered, slipping her hands together and undoing the heavy belt that was around the guard’s waist, laced through the touch and tight belt-loops on his trousers. She began untying his trousers along the front, finally just pushing her dexterous fingers in, making the quivering green-furred Mytan arch his back. “But fortunately for you, what I am after is exactly what you are already giving me in very appreciable amounts, Mytan. So just let go.” Luna whispered.

“This can’t be happening.” Mytan huffed, his knees up, toes pushed out the floor, legs shaking. Luna pushes his thick dark phallus between her heavy bosom, squeezing her hands on either side to ensnare it there, pulling at his twitching muscular flesh.

“But it is happening.” Luna murmured, those ribbons of white fanning out from behind her, as if sprouting from her back like Alps’ little wings. The room was bathed in white light. Luna pushed those bands of light to Mytan’s core, tapping heavily into the energy flaring off of him like light from the sun. The moment those bands connected with them, he arched back, and Luna grinned, pushing her absolute love of her family, her friends, and her new chance to live into him. “Taste my happiness, Mytan. Feel my love. Know what it feels like to find yourself free and among friends after being alone for seven hundred years... and know first hand that I am happier than you are in this moment.” Mytan’s

head tilted back, his body shaking, tears streaming down his face as he felt those things that Luna wished for him.

In that moment of emotional heaven, Luna lowered her head and took Mytan's willing, pulsing flesh into her hot mouth, stroking him slow and delicate, swirling her tongue around that aching tip with fevered lust, as if for her own equal pleasure.

"Ahh-nuh!" He tried to warn Luna, but he erupted forcefully over her tongue, painting it with short, heavy squirts of salty, musky seed. He leaned forward, face twisted in a horrified gaze as perhaps he felt he'd dishonored the priestess in just spraying his seed right in her mouth, but she cupped his sack and pushed her mouth down harder over him, then back up, suckling hard to get every drop he could yield. The lupine male shuddered heavily as he relented, realizing that the priestess wanted that, and his legs shook as he eagerly gave it to her. She leaned back and looked lovingly into his eyes, those ribbons still locked in his heart as it pounded rapidly in his chest, fluttering like mad as she drew his energy almost greedily. She stroked his wet, twitching cock with her hand, not another drop rolling from him after her thorough mouth was through with him. His legs shook in hypersensitivity as Luna's hand did not relent, the emerald Amanian making desperate little squeaks with the continued attention from the priestess.

"Oh by the essence, P-Priestess Luna, I – " He was silenced as her mouth took him again, tongue battering his most sensitive point to shut him up. She was not done with him. He had just a bit more to give. Luna's mouth worked over him with religious zeal as he writhed and twisted in the chair, finding out in that moment that he really was completely under her power. Her ribbons didn't hold him down, but the shocks of pleasure that she sent through them in waves made it so he could not actually struggle free.

Luna's body was an inferno. She was not unaffected by such an act under normal circumstances, but she could not remember the last time she had such intense energy flowing from one person. Alps had more essence, but it was not as easy to draw. This wolf had a healer's essence and it was perfect for the healer priestess to draw from. She found herself desperate for more, and pulled his thick cock between her breasts, trapping that wet flesh there, making a bridge over the top of that channel formed by her mammaries with her strong, graceful fingers before heaving her heavy bosom up and down over Mytan's lap. She used heavy breeding strokes with her whole upper body, tail thrashing and flagging the scent thickly to her willing victim.

"I am getting close..." whispered the male. It had not taken a lot of work, but Luna was fine with that. She held still and panted out,

“Yes... Give it to me, Mytan!” She pushed her breasts tighter together, looking up at him, her mouth wide and tongue out so that his tip slipped into her muzzle just a bit, mouth wide enough for him to see where his thick release would soon be going. Her multicolored eyes gazed longingly up to him. He held her shoulders and began bucking his hips hard, rump coming up off the seat finally. He was squatting down a bit as he pumped those heavy mammaries from slightly underneath, but he didn’t have to do that long.

“Ahhaaahn!” He cried out, toes gripping the floor, hips shaking as he gave a few short hard thrusts, and Luna felt hot wetness pulse right to the back of her throat. She enjoyed so much watching his face, contorted in agonized pleasure as, with half open eyes himself, he watched those opalescent ribbons of spunk fling hard from his twitching tip over her pink tongue, cradling and gathering that fluid essence, pooling it in her muzzle for him to stare at before she closed her mouth around him, suckling hard as she made sure he could hear the heavy, guttural contractions of her throat, swallowing all of it down. Her ribbons glowed ever brighter as she drew from him so gratefully.

The priestess finally let Mytan come down from his spiritual high, those ribbons of light snapping back from his chest, releasing his heart, and fading away as her eyes just glowed quietly. She caressed in a tender, casual fashion that wet, softening masculinity as she pushed the green-furred male back into his chair, his braided hair resting over his chest as he tilted his head back, possibly dizzy in his afterglow as he relaxed, the attention less aggressive on him at that point.

“That... was the single most incredible thing that’s ever happened to me.” Mytan rumbled exhaustedly.

“It gets better. Loyalty and hard work are rewarded, Mytan. Remember that.” Luna gathered up her garments, gritting her teeth as she realized her honey had run down to her knees. She had, at one time, better control of her body. Mytan nodded blankly, drunkenly.

“When you can stand again, you will want to find a bed and get some rest. I would suggest not crawling in bed with the Asuna girl, or I will have to waste that energy you gave me healing you.” She grinned at him and padded calmly from the room.

As soon as she had ascended the stairs to the sleeping cabins of the riverboat, she dropped back against a wall, shivering, pushing her hands between her thighs, gritting her teeth. Her hands pushed under the folds of her robes and fingertip achingly stirred her swollen, burning clit. She did not wish to force Mytan too far in their first encounter, as she would be able to capitalize if she had another chance to draw from him by escalating her attention on him. But oh how that left her burning. She staggered to the first room on her right and

pushed the door open. Whale looked up from a book he was reading, shirtless and achingly approachable as he sat so availably upon his still-made bed.

“Hello Priestess.” He offered nicely. Luna’s abdominal muscles tightened gleefully at the opportunity there before her. She gritted her teeth tighter.

“Wrong... door.” She forced herself to say. She pulled his door shut.

“Thank you, visit again.” came a muffled reply from inside. She was not quite that desperate, even in her essence-provoked heat. She staggered to another door. It was locked. She was not going to break a door down for this. If she kept going, her body would yield, she assumed. She just needed to busy herself a moment. She pushed open the next door.

Reika lay on her bed, thighs parted wide, four fingers pushed to the knuckles into her wide-spread honey-pot, thumb wiggling back and forth over her dark little bud as her toes gripped unkempt sheets. In her other hand, Bone, clutched to her chest. Reika spoke just loud enough to be heard in raspy, breathless lust.

“Yus! Yus, you is biting Reika, Bone. Is good strong bite, yes? Large teeth and strong claws, hold Reika down... Bite when Reika cuummmss...” she growled out that last part passionately. Luna could not move. She could not force herself to look away, her hands gripping the frame of Reika’s door. She was aware from what Alps had told her that Bone and Reika could communicate with it. What was he saying to her? Was there really something between them across the void? Despite Bone being part of an unknown creature? Luna shook her head a little as she found herself on all fours over Reika, the girl hyena looking up at her, quivering with pleased heat, teetering on the edge of release before Luna so suddenly appeared over her knocked her back from her peak.

“I...” Luna was rarely at a loss for words, but she could not even remember traversing the room to get here. Her body wanted very much to be involved.

“Bite.” Reika said flatly.

“What?” Luna asked in something of a daze.

“Bite Reika. Bone talk, you bite.” Luna blinked at that, and then pushed her body over the Asuna’s, her mouth clamping where her neck and shoulder met. Her body was making it impossible for her to resist this interaction, even though she was very skeptical of the hyena’s stability. She pushed her teeth hotly to her flesh, and Reika groaned lustfully.

“Sorry to interrupt, I – “ Luna tried to explain herself.

“No talking – Biting!” Reika demanded. “Biting Reika harder!” Her voice rose to a squeak at the end, her arm flexing against Luna’s front, making it obvious she was pistoning that pussy with all four fingers hard. She clutched Bone tighter. Luna promptly shut up. She was not going to get herself clubbed by a frustrated girl right on the edge for not following directions. Luna bit harder, worrying that she’d have to heal Reika from it. The soft slapping sound of Reika’s palm over her sex was loud enough to remind the priestess that she had showed up at perhaps the only time that the girl might have requested the assistance of a priestess like this. She seemed to have absolutely no inhibition in that moment.

“Harder!” Reika barked loudly, shaking. Luna winced a little as that familiar coppery taste spilled on her tongue. Reika jerked hard and then gave a groan that the priestess was absolutely positive could be heard elsewhere on the ship. The lady wolf was so started by the sudden turn of events that she had not even thought to draw from Reika. The dull thumping of Reika’s hand under Luna’s thighs turned to wet, sloppy slapping, Reika shaking all over. “Bone!” she whimpered, “Hold Reika down!” Luna took Reika’s cue and pushed her hands on the girl’s shoulders, teeth staying tight, pulling a bit ferociously, and she kept pounding, writhing and fighting the white wolf female’s grip. Luna bit harder, making Reika squall with pleasure, her legs wrapping around Luna’s thighs and grinding her fist into herself. She then pulled that wet hand free, holding it on Luna’s lower back, panting raggedly, letting herself cool down slowly. Luna considered drawing on her afterglow, but decided not to. The Asuna’s essence was likely more valuable to someone with Nidaja’s tendencies than the priestess’ healing powers.

“Feel better?” Luna asked, looking into Reika’s half-closed eyes.

“Bone is saying nice things about Luna. He is right, Luna is nice to Reika. She bites nice for Letai girl.” Reika caressed Luna’s cheek with a wet, sticky hand.

“I broke the skin. I can heal that for you.” Luna murmured. Reika shook her head, still softly panting.

“No no... Reika is liking to feel it. Is good. Asuna is strong. Bites not bad.” Luna nodded dizzily at that, her body still burning. She would have to get used to pain being a pleasurable thing to Reika, and wondered if she should have been far more rough with the girl’s brother. Reika tilted her head back a little, nostrils flaring at the air a bit. She grinned and moved a leg up between Luna’s thighs. Her knee made contact with the priestess with an audible squish. The motherly priestess went scarlet.

“Sorry. I was essence-drawing from Mytan, and it got me a little...” She tried to think of a word. Reika looked at Bone with a drunken gaze then grinned. She gave a display of her deceptive strength, rolling a shivering Luna onto her back, her thigh pushed between the Letai’s own tightly. The white lady wolf’s heart raced. She had certainly not expected this. Reika slid down Alps’ mother’s body, kissing all the way down, even over her robes. Luna arched her back hard as the Asuna girl’s mouth cupped tight to Luna’s sex. She was not even aware that Reika was willing to do such a thing, and her body drew in a hot thrill of pleasure from the first touch of that tongue upon her burning clit.

What happened next she was even less prepared for. Reika pushed the more slender, bare and smooth bottom nine inches of Bone deep into her body, grinding her tongue hard over the priestess’ clit. Having Bone inside her felt somehow like a completely unimaginable taboo. This was the bone of a creature from the Nether. A monster by any normal standard, he was held in deep, pushed up against Luna’s cervix, violating her in a way that Luna had never, ever thought she would.

She might have shooed Reika off of her and asked that she keep Bone for herself, and just use her tongue, which would have worked just great, except she was really painfully riled up and there was no denying how incredible it felt to have Bone jammed in deep while a very gifted and speedy hyena tongue abused her clit. Luna groaned out gladly, knees falling apart, giving in to Reika’s bone club. Her mind touched on the curiosity of whether or not Reika used Bone like that. Luna also tightened up a little as the memory washed over her that Bone was aware, across the void, of what was going on around him if Reika was near him. He knew he was being used to pleasure a Letai priestess. Did he like that? He was apparently talking to Reika to get her off when she was alone with him, was he telling her what to do?

Luna tightened up, jolted a bit as Reika began to piston Bone in and out of her soaking wet sex. Her naughty mind wandered into scenarios where she was caught in such a predicament, and she remembered briefly things she had done to this girl’s brother, and the hard, tireless pounding he’d given her.

“Priestess is friends with Bone now, yes? Liking Bone? Even Asuna Empress is not getting to be with Bone!” The hyena laughed a bit at that, and Luna suddenly felt dirty and ashamed of her searing lust for perhaps the first time in her existence just from the way that was said. And that shame caused her to suddenly gush around that stroking length of bone-club. Reika cheered loudly, and pulled Bone free with a wet pop, cupping her mouth hard to Luna’s convulsing sex and suckling and lapping and grinding her tongue with inexplicable skill, rocking Luna hard, right to her core, quenching that heat in a beautiful washing of wave after wave of pleasure. The priestess cried out twice, long and high, body arched, legs shaking as she suffered through a deep and powerful climax over charcoal hyena muzzle. As the intensity of that waned, and

Luna's whimpering and writhing calmed, Reika just held her mouth against the priestess' sex, seeming to just enjoy the heat and her taste. Finally, that hot, capable mouth parted from her soaked sex. Luna slumped back, panting heavily as Reika sat beside her, almost comically touching and teasing the wolf's pink, swollen nipples. The priestess was finally able to answer that shameful question.

"Yes... B... Bone is quite nice. Thank you for... Thank you for letting him help." Luna's head was spinning a bit. She could not decide whether all of this was a good thing or a bad thing. Reika was unstable, certainly, but she seemed highly loyal. Reika was quiet for a bit, and then spoke.

"Bone is happy too." Luna sat up a bit, pulling her robes back down and letting herself recover and look a little less disheveled on the bed with the entirely bare Reika.

"He... Is aware you do these things with him?" the priestess asked.

"He is knowing, yes." Reika leaned back and Luna blushed a little as she watched the girl licking the somewhat tapered length of Bone before the hand-wrapping where Reika normally held him.

"Does he mind? I mean, he's okay with it?" Luna asked curiously. Could it be that Bone didn't care what was done with a part of him shorn off ages ago that he simply used to communicate?

"Bone is happy to be using for pleasure. He is feeling it." Reika seemed calm about that.

"Bone feels... pleasure?" Luna did not know if she liked that prospect.

"No, Bone is feeling your pleasure. And Reika's." She focused on the weapon a bit, and then looked up again. "He is saying Letai is doing the same, but they is making others feel. He is feeling. He knows Reika's pleasure, and likes feeling Reika happy. We is good, good friends." She nodded simply. Luna looked curiously at the weapon. Bone was able to feel the pleasure and essence of others? Her original misgivings about Bone's true nature melted a little bit. Something truly dark would savor those darker feelings, not what Reika said Bone liked. Still, she might later avoid situations where Bone was driven to her cervix and she was forced to peak around him. That was not the kind of reputation even a younger, more adventurous priestess wanted!

"Thank you for helping me then, both of you." Luna said softly, giving a weakened smile.

"Is okay, Reika likes." The priestess did not doubt that. Luna stood up and stretched.

“I am glad we have you with us, Reika.” Luna stated, wanting to make sure that the Asuna girl did not feel used.

“Reika is having fun fighting and being with friends. These are best days of Reika’s life. Reika may go home one day, but she is hoping that day is not soon.” Luna grinned at the girl, ruffling her short red hair a bit.

“We will enjoy your company as long as you like, Reika. Amani and the Letai are both happy to have the help of the Asuna, particularly a valiant and strong Asuna like you. Your empress is well represented by you and your brother. She would be extremely proud.” Reika pulled her wrap-around top on, and wriggled a bit happily on the bed.

“And Empress Dominis would be very happy to see the quality of blood that she now bears with her own.” At first, Luna was not sure of what Reika meant, but then she remembered, with a start, that Rios had actually borrowed her son for the purpose of producing an heir. Her bloodline would be a part of the top of the Asuna empire. She had not given that much thought, but Reika’s statement made it a hard reality. Luna kisses the top of the girl’s head and murmured,

“I shall go and rest. You should too.” Luna stated.

“Reika is just taking a break. Watching is now and sleeping is later. Nidaja is giving Asuna’s time to eat and rest and play with Bone.” Luna flattened her ears, feeling fairly certain that Nidaja had not been asked if it was okay to head into one of the rooms to fuck a bone-club. But she padded out, lost in thought. Alps and Nita would likely someday produce an heir as well. Luna had to make sure that they all survived at any cost. The world was shaping up to be an interesting place if they could pull it off, and Luna looked forward to spending time with a large, wonderful family. It was these thoughts that she took to slumber, fantasizing about happy days and beautiful memories for the first time since long before she had even been Shadowfallen. Despite the danger, there was a glimmer of wonderful, bright hope for Alps and Nita. She wanted to make sure she was a part of it.

Leal munched on part of a fish that had been shared with everyone on the raft. Ceriss had snagged it with her essence and pulled it aboard, and then carefully cooked it with an essence fire while Lunaris and Leal held either end. His hands were a little toasted, but not intolerably by any extent. This was the fourth of fifth fish they had shared like that, and it was starting to feel routine. The thick, unrelenting fog was still all around them. It seemed as if it travelled

with them like a curse to make sure they never made it home. As he munched his left over piece of fish, he watched Neit. She was on her back, her legs wrapped around the thighs of a shuddering Lhap islander. His hips were ground deep into hers as he gave out a final, hot, happy bark, and Neit giggled a little as the feeling of being violently flooded by the slightly smaller fox. This was their third time together as they were trapped on the raft. Ceriss drew from them, hands glowing a lighter violet than before. As she had noted, each time in succession the yield would be less. This had gone on for three days, one encounter with the pretty thief each day for a lucky and happy fox. Neph leaned down, panting softly, and snuggled with Neit. He seemed to have genuine affection for her, and they had talked a lot in between sessions. Neit was excited to find out that Neph had been a treasure hunter, and that's how he ended up in Amani. Treasure hunting was like legal, sometimes sanctioned stealing! It was a fun idea. She had not realized there were so many islands, and that so many were abandoned due to storms, illnesses, or a myriad of other causes.

For now, the topic of discussion was their share of the fish, as they had been nice enough to give a nice showing of affection for the priestess (and everyone else). They were given the best and largest portions of that catch to enjoy, as everyone else was doing far less physical work on the raft. Over three hours each day they had collected enough water to share between them for another two days, a nice reserve, so they felt a little more positive, and that gave rise to a bit more passionate play between the fox and thief. Leal had enjoyed watching them, and had been given some manual attention on one such occasion by an idly playful Ceriss. Kaji reminded the priestess that he intended to collect on her offer when they reached land, and she teased and taunted him a bit more.

All in all, despite being disastrous, the journey still held a fairly light mood, which comforted Leal a bit. There was not the sense of dread that there had been initially. The vulpine and wolf girl dressed again and finished their meals. It was meager, to be sure, but it would certainly be enough to survive, and it tasted great cooked by essence. Leal even teased that Ceriss could make a decent living at that, only to have the teasing reflected by being told that some Letai actually drew essence best from those enjoying delicious cuisine, and they often ran inns with that specifically in mind. Kaji cursed the dark one for costing him the opportunity to try that food.

It was amid some bantering of that nature that Kaji finally perked up and held up his hand. Everyone continued to talk until he specifically called for silence. Leal listened carefully, as if thinking something had found them on the open sea. He shook his head, replying softly.

"I just hear the ocean." Neit nodded too, kicking her feet a little in the water. Putting her feet in the water seemed to refresh her nicely after sex.

Ceriss seemed to read more into what the captain was saying. She spoke up clearly.

“No, he’s right. You are hearing the ocean. You are hearing waves.” Leal nodded back to her.

“Right, that’s what I said.” He was not certain why this called for silence.

“There’s no wind really. The weather’s calm.” Lunaris pointed out, seeming to understand the riddle of Kaji too. Leal looked at him blankly, then widened his eyes.

“Waves! On a shore!” He got on his knees and focused on the direction, but Ceriss had already figured it out, and was pushing the craft rapidly toward it.

“Land! Land!” cried Neit as the raft leapt and bounced on the ocean a bit as they pushed toward the sound as it got louder and louder. Ceriss’ tail wagged frantically as she pushed a lot of essence to finally get them off that raft. Three days pushing them sometimes faster than the wind could when they were not three days out had made Leal worry a lot, but they could finally at least be in a stable spot with some hope to rest and recover.

“Land! Land!” cried the fox, gripping the side of the raft.

“Yes!” cried Neit happily.

“No! Land!” screamed Neph.

“Shit! Land!” Kaji barked.

Leal looked up just in time to see the shore and the raft meet. Ceriss was focused entirely on making the craft move toward the shore, so she could not see that when the limited visibility through the fog revealed the sandy shore only sixty feet from the raft. The moment the raft hit, everyone was launched forward into the sand quite hard. Leal got a mouth full, and struggled to get onto all fours and expel it. The sputtering, coughing Kaji seemed to suffer the same.

“Perfect disembark!” Ceriss barked as she stood on the beach. Just like when she had gotten onto the raft, he had no idea how she got off without being hurled. She looked at everyone and grinned. “The fog is thinner here. It seems to lift further up the shore.” She helped Neit up, who was trying to get sand out of her ear. The fox’s pants came off as he had not secured them yet, so he was trying to get them back on. Lunaris and Kaji moved up alongside Ceriss.

“We’re on land. You promised.” Kaji rumbled. Ceriss laughed at him.

“Keep it for now, Kaji, we need to make sure we are *safe* before we consider ourselves survivors. There should be plenty of time for that and I will be very thorough if I have a chance to rest a little. Come on.” Lunar is laughed heartily and Kaji grumbled a bit as he fell into step behind Leal and Ceriss. Ceriss took Leal’s arm in hers, feeling happy to be on solid ground at last. But she began, as they marched up the shore, further out of the fog, to lean on the guard a bit more. She was very tired, and he knew it. Her happy face was in spite of this.

“Hey, at least it’s not a desert island!” Neph chirped as he pointed to the more distant forest that was revealing itself. As they went up the rather steam and sandy embankment, that gave way to tall beach grasses and little shrubs and finally to the larger trees where the fog seemed to completely terminate.

“We should find fresh water first and foremost, if this forest is here, there will be some, I am sure.” Ceriss moved toward the forest.

“Any idea where this is?” asked Neph. Kaji looked around, then looked up.

“Well, the sun is there, it’s afternoon, our shadows are...” He looked back and forth and then rubbed his chin with concern.

“We are not where we were hoping to be.” Ceriss said for him. “Based on the position of the sun, we are on an Eastern shore.”

“What’s that mean?” Neit asked, seeming worried again. Kaji answered.

“It means that we went the opposite direction of home. This is a place I have no knowledge of.” There was a collective gasp between Neit and Leal. That was very bad news.

“We survived. There is water, probably food here too. Time is all we need to be able to figure out a way back. Let’s focus on the necessity first, then we can worry about the getting back part. The best shot of the dark one to get rid of us failed.” Ceriss seemed quite proud of that. Leal considered that quietly a moment and then realized with a nod that this was the second time the best the dark one could do had not been enough to stop her. She was perhaps feeling cocky after this bit of survival. Leal grinned, letting himself feel that too.

“Remember though, you promised.” Kaji stated flatly. Neph shook his head and laughed. The fog slowly retreated from the shores as the group pushed into the forest a bit to find a good source of food and water. For now, their survival was assured and that gave them some comfort. Things might be hard ahead of them, but at least they were not a wind-storm away from certain death on a tiny shattered piece of boat deck. They had some time to work out

the details of their survival, and they were at least successful in a mission intended to save the entire city of Diera. Even if they never made it back and had to live out their days on a distant shore, they would be remembered as lost heroes back home. This was a fair exchange for a castle guard, Leal thought. Most of what they ever did was kick out folks that did not know that it was time to leave at the end of the day. This was an adventure his friends and family would certainly be jealous of. It was enough for him, even if he never got to tell any of them about it.

They explored the dense, natural forest together, unaware of where they were, what they would find, or what treasures or dangers awaited them in an entirely unknown land. Was it an island? Could it be another large continent like Amani? All they knew for sure was that they were alive, and that made this land, for the moment, wonderful.

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 16

Leal held a plump, dripping melon half in each hand. 'Pish!' went the melon as his jaws clamped on it, rind and all. His hunger was pretty obvious, but that, paired with the divine flavor of this fruit were far too much for him to keep his composure. Others were eating too, and none that much more reserved. It had been Neit who brought the fruit back to the small makeshift camp where they had been resting through the afternoon and overnight. For the most part they had slept after enjoying plentiful water, but now, their minds clear from the horrors of their uncertain journey, they were all very much back into the spirit of tending to their immediate needs. Ceriss was eating the most casually, but she had seemingly spent most of her life about to die, so she appeared to be the least affected by the harrowing experience. Kaji sat hip to hip with her, perhaps waiting for his chance to cash in on her promise, though he was not teasing her about it so verbally. He at least seemed to know when it might be seen as an annoyance. His vulpine crewmate Neph consumed melon just as frantically as Leal, sitting close with his now close friend Neit. She was not much bigger than him, so they were actually kind of charming together. Lunaris sat alone, one gutted melon-half filled with water from a nearby stream. He was done eating, he merely sipped contentedly at sweetened fresh stream water.

The shade of the tall tropical trees kept the heat from being unbearable, and the close proximity to the beach gave a comfortable breeze that ruffled their fur and made this day of continued survival in an unknown land more like a vacation. It was Ceriss who ultimately broke the serenity.

"I am pretty certain now that we are on a shore opposite of the Amanian homeland you all know so well. I would like to clarify that while some Letai left to come to these lands in times past, we did not have any of them return." There was a chill up Leal's spine as she said this. Why would she ruin the moment with such a claim?

"What could stop Letai from returning?" asked Neit fearfully, speaking the worry that kindled in everyone's heart.

"One of two things and one answer is cause for some hope." Ceriss stood up, pulling her robes a little tighter. Leal watched her reverently. She seemed a

little less dark once survival seemed like a thing, even though she was on borrowed time due to her past abuse of the essence.

“Don’t go keepin’ us in suspense.” Kaji rumbled.

“First, obviously, they might not have made it, or things here were harder than things there and they lost their lives. Late in the war, about sixty or seventy Letai left for the sea. It was hoped that they could start a colony, and come back for the rest once it was found to be fruitful. Losing seventy at once who did not come back... was not good for the efforts back home.”

“What do y’ think happened t’ them?” asked Kaji.

“Well, the first option is what we assumed.” Ceriss paced a bit. “But this place... does not seem like they would have had much trouble surviving, so maybe they never made it, just as we nearly did not.” She rubbed the back of her head.

“We had a little different reason for nearly dying on this trip.” It was Lunaris who replied. Ceriss nodded at that as she stroked Leal’s ears tenderly.

“The other possibility... is that they got involved with something here and could not return.” She seemed a little more doubtful of that. “I think after 700 years though, at least one would have returned, a descendant or something. So I still assume the prior. The Letai would have stayed here if they were needed and could help, that is a duty we are bound to, but I doubt that duty would have lasted for centuries.” She leaned back against a tree.

“Well, we are here, we survived, do you think we could return home?” asked Neit. Kaji answered.

“If we got a boat, even Neph could stock it with food and head back until we hit the opposite shore.” Ceriss crossed her arms.

“There is one other distinct possibility...” The survivors all looked at her.

“And that is?” Leal asked.

“Maybe sailing won’t ever get you back. What if the lack of wind through most of our journey was not an effect of the crystal?” Kaji grunted.

“That... would certainly make sense as t’ why no one comes back. Getting stuck in a pocket with no wind would be fatal to a journey. Hit some doldrums when I was south-coast bound once. Thought I were dead that week, I tell ye.” Neit crossed her arms as well.

“Would you be able to get us back the same way we got here?” she asked. Ceriss shrugged a bit.

“A little raft is one thing - I was able to move that. I can’t do a large ship, and we’d need something with better shelter, more food-stocks, and lots of fresh water, since we might not have the fog conveniently providing that. I assure you that our skills alone were not responsible for our survival to this point. A lot of luck was involved.” Neph stood up and shook some of the sticky melon off his hands.

“Well, I din think we’d make it, but here we be. We at least are havin’ time to think of a way now. So what do we do now that our bellies are bein’ full?” His huge ears twitched quizzically. Leal stood, Lunar is following. Ceriss found herself inadvertently in a leading role. She deferred immediately.

“Lunar is?” she asked. The general seemed thoughtful. Leal was actually a bit impressed. Ceriss was looked upon as the one with the most power, and she’d saved them already more times than he wanted to think but she still knew her part in this new world. Nita did not appoint Ceriss to a position of power; she was to take the orders of the crown which, in this situation, could only be given by Lunar is. He was the highest ranking officer available. The dark-furred general finally answered.

“Let’s find high ground first, and get a view of what’s around us. If there’s some kind of settlement and the people seem not to be the warlike types it might help us to find out what the locals know about this land. If it’s all wilderness, that will make things harder, but the availability of food and water certainly do not suggest that this place is not hospitable. However, we will need to try not to frighten them. They are likely not going to be like us, they might not know the problems we have in our land, and we should strive not to let our problems become theirs. That’s not a very friendly thing to do.” Leal looked over to Ceriss. Her dark fur crackled around her for a bit as she looked back. She sighed softly.

“Alright, fine.” Her form shifted slightly, a hard thing for everyone’s eyes to really follow. When it was done, she looked a little like Luna, solid white fur gleaming. Her hair was longer, however, and both of her eyes were violet. This was the form of Ceriss that Leal had been one of the few lucky ones to see. What she likely looked like before her abuse of the essence damaged her. “Better?” she asked.

“Oh yes...” Kaji growled. “This is quite nice.”

“That will help, yes.” Lunar is stated. “Now, the trees here are too dense for us to try to even find the direction of high ground, so...” He seemed to think a bit more.

"I can help with that." Neit stated, and she shot up a tree with a level of assurance that seemed to suggest that trees were a favorite mode of transit for the former thief. She had chosen a properly tall one, so it took a little while for her to get to the top, even so, but the use of acrobatics made her journey to the top seem particularly dangerous and yet entirely effortless. Leal held his breath at times as she seemed to just recklessly cast herself from one branch to another. Finally, she reached the top of the tree.

"Shows off a bit, that one..." Kaji murmured softly.

"It's useful." Ceriss replied.

"It's sexy." Neph claimed. Kaji rolled his eyes.

"Got you hooked, don't she?" he asked. Neph grinned. Neit's voice chimed from on top of the trees.

"We're not alone!" Leal's heart sped up. He had half expected to find out it was a large deserted island and that they would be dealing with their problem by themselves. A very new and potentially dangerous dynamic was present when it was found that there were others here.

"What can you tell us about them?" asked Lunar is loudly.

"They have a village about ... eight miles south of here. We came in pretty close, and it's the closest thing I can see, but there are mountains pretty close due west. If there are other settlements, I bet they are there. We are in something of a valley, so the one village is all I can see, but if this is an island, it's pretty big." Leal listened apprehensively. He called up to Neit.

"What's the village like?" he asked. There was a pause.

"It's a village. It's got houses and stuff. And a dock, but I don't see any boats. There's forest around it, so I can't see into it, just mostly white rooftops, what are you specifically asking about?" she barked down again.

"Is there a *wall*?" asked Lunar is before Leal could ask that important question. Walls were a good indication of the mental state of the society, and the danger inherent outside of it.

"I can't tell but I don't think so!" Neit called. "The trees leading to it are really thick!"

"Don't look at the trees, look at the beach; can you see the beach in front of the village close to the dock?" Lunar is called again. Neph perked his ears

too. Kaji seemed to nod with everything said, committing to memory the details of the situation. Neit answered right way,

“Yes, I see the beach, It doesn’t look like there’s defense on the beach. It’s too far to see if there are people.” She shouted from atop her tree. She hopped down branch after branch and finally came down with a chuff onto the forest floor. Neph hugged her in greeting which she happily accepted. Leal looked to Lunariss with expectation. He seemed to be thinking heavily.

“What are we doing from here, General?” asked Ceriss.

“There is a lot of risk involved. I am trying to figure out if we should allow a scout to learn more before we reveal we are here. We have no friends here, and no safe places that we know to run. Just running straight to the village and saying hello might be what the Letai did long ago.” Ceriss sighed softly.

“Yeah, that sure sounds like them.” She noted.

“But if even one of use shows up, if we are so different from the people there, we might suffer the same fate regardless.” Neit proclaimed this with some exasperation.

“How close do you need to see someone to mimic them?” asked Lunariss, looking to Ceriss.

“If they are not even lupine, I imagine I would have a hard time pulling it off, and that takes quite a bit of essence. I would not be able to maintain it long.” Lunariss frowned. “Then I cannot risk the most powerful of us to that mission. It needs to be someone who would appear non-threatening and could get information without seeming like they would cause harm to the village.” The general crossed his arms in thought.

“Crap.” The word blurted out came from Neph.

“Well, you don’t appear very threatening.” Kaji clarified.

“This in’t what I signed up fer. I could die th’ second someone sees me. This en’t my best idea.” Leal rubbed his muzzle a bit.

“It seems the best possible answer on these lines. And you are quick enough. How about if we have you meet with someone outside the village to gauge their reaction, and if they seem hostile or too frightened, we get you out of there? Ceriss can stay nearby, disguised as part of the terrain for that, yes?” He looked at the Letai priestess. He had seen her pretend to be a statue, so he knew that she could make herself appear like pretty much anything. The priestess spoke up finally.

"I could do that, but we must approach the village carefully. Getting caught and attacked is bad, but harming an innocent in the process would be irreparably worse. We are about to become possibly the first envoys to the kingdom of Amani. We have to try to make this as amicable as we possibly can. Promise that we will avoid conflict." She said this to Lunariss, who she perhaps felt might have a more military angle on dealing with this new land. He nodded to that, seeming to understand.

"It will do none of us any good to immediately start making enemies here." He stated calmly. At his leave, the group headed back down to the beach, and followed it along the tree line to stay out of the more dense forest and make better time. The walk was mostly quiet, as the knowledge that they were not alone made the group a little more cautious about being loud. They were not trying to sneak exactly; they were just not trying to attract attention. Lunariss had felt it might attract just as much attention if they really were sneaking, so they decided to just travel more or less without speaking. Neit and Neph talked a little, seeming to just like relying on one another to bolster their strength and their bravery. There was a short pause in their journey when Kaji found a very, very large tooth of some kind that had washed up on the shore. He picked it up and declared it the first new item for his ship's treasure when the queen bought him a new boat. He seemed pretty sure that would be his reward, and this had encouraged him a bit since breakfast. The tooth was nearly as long as his forearm, so he tucked it in his belt. This would fetch a good price back home.

It was after noon before they got to an inward curve of the beach where they were just able to see the town about half a mile away. They pushed into the trees a bit to make themselves less visible. Leal looked with some worry to Kaji, and then to Neph, before nodding. Kaji had to prod Neph forward, toward the village, as the rest of the party hunkered down a little in the trees. Ceriss followed behind a little more quietly, and a pretty fair distance back. Neph took careful steps, trying not to make much noise and then circled back, heading right for Ceriss fearfully. Ceriss lowered herself tight to the ground, whispering out softly.

"What's wrong?" Neph flattened his ears.

"There's a *road* there." He seemed positively petrified.

"Oh no a road we are doomed." Ceriss narrowed her eyes at the small fox as she said this.

"Please don't tease. What if they are huge? What if they have those teeth like what Kaji found?" his voice was a little squeaky. Ceriss sighed.

“Those things with giant teeth can only kill you. I don’t have to stop there.” She growled. Neph squeaked, and turned around rather automatically. He stumbled back toward the mentioned road. The dark Letai Priestess was definitely a scary thing to have to contend with, and he knew that her power was not mere boasting. He took his chances with the unknown, striding purposefully out of the trees and onto the road. It was very neat and clean and orderly, a carefully built cobblestone street under the heavy canopy. It was strange to see such a nice road in a place that seemed so wild. How did it stay clean and packed and worn smooth near such a small village? Neph looked back to the forest, uncertain if Ceriss was even still following. He doubted that she would just let him go on his own very far, she needed to make sure that the first meeting was at least peaceful. He moved on the road toward the village. He could not hear Ceriss following, so he accepted the possibility that she would be pretty far behind and he’d be completely full of teeth before she could get to him. At least someone would know what happened to him ultimately. That gave some comfort. Not much.

As he rounded a curve on the road, he got several answers at once. The first was what the people looked like. She actually did not look terribly different from him. The slender, taller female had much longer, narrower ears, and her eyes were almond-shaped, large and expressive. She did not notice the Lhap right away, the rabbit-like female answering the other question by sweeping leaves and branches off the road with a long, wide broom of some kind. She was dusty brown in color with doe-like brown eyes, ears tall and perked, feet bare but body adorned in shimmering silky fabric which cascaded along her arms and wrapped around her hips. There were soft chimes of tiny bits of glittering silver metal along the hem of her skirt down to her shins and her wide sleeves, shoulders bare, chest wrapped in the same fabric as the skirt. She wore a thick silver and light blue gemstone necklace which seemed somewhat tribal in design, but her clothing was elegant and delicate. She wore two broad feathers clasped to her right ear with a gold sun-shaped coin-like accessory.

“Hello.” Neph gritted his teeth as his own voice came from behind him, in the bushes. Ceriss had given away the fact that he was standing there. The rabbit looked up, seeming unafraid at first, not at all startled that someone else could be on the road. Was it so peaceful here that they did not worry about bandits either? When she saw the fox, she smiled, and spoke softly, not in common, but in Neph’s own native tongue from his islands far south of Diera along the coast of Amani.

“You are a week late for the festival, silly, what brings you this far north?” She did not seem afraid or angry or any of the other deadly things that Neph was preparing for. He rubbed one of his ears. Were Lhap settled across the sea? His islands were sparsely populated, but there were stories of them being settled from other places, so perhaps his bloodline really came from these lands. Maybe everything here had big ears.

"I am a bit more lost than ye' suspect." He offered in common. She tilted her head a bit, seeming not to understand him. He repeated it in his native tongue, clarifying that she didn't speak common. She gasped and rubbed her chin. She stated in a soft, velvet tone,

"You are not coming from Lhap. You speak a strange language. You do not come for the festival. Why are you here? Are you in trouble?" There was a sense of worry and caring in her voice. It did not seem to be worry for herself, however. It was the sound of someone who genuinely wanted to help. This was encouraging to Neph, so he moved closer.

"I have washed ashore here. I am not even sure where here is." He offered in his tongue for her to understand.

"Are you from farther away than Lhap? Are you from Val-Rasha?" she asked with a little hint of fear. The fox did not know exactly how to respond. He did not know where that was, and if that was what she called his homeland, not knowing what his word for it was he did not want to lie about it.

"I am not sure what Val-Rasha is." The fox approached the slender, rather pretty lapine female. She approached as well. The broom she had could be used as a weapon if she needed to, but she was not holding it like one.

"It's a place far south of here. It's got a big sea and an island in the middle, and the people there are very strange and keep to themselves mostly, but most of us know they are also extremely dangerous if you do something bad in their lands. So, we tend to be a little more wary of those coming from there. Which direction did you come from?" she asked.

"East." He stated, pointing at the ocean. "From over the sea, we think."

"We?" asked the lapine with a bit more concern. The vulpine cursed himself as he gritted his teeth. How incredibly stupid he was! He rubbed the back of his head. How was he supposed to proceed now? She seemed harmless enough, but he didn't know if she was like the rest. The fox heard rustling from behind him, and turned around to see... a very beautiful white-furred Lhap fox female. Ceriss had switched forms into something that would have been familiar to the rabbit from how she was treating Neph. The fox was impressed beyond words. He let the priestess talk, her ears perhaps overdone, larger than normal even for a Lhap, which only made her more beautiful to Neph.

"Sorry, I got caught up in the trees back there, love, I... oh..." She bowed to the rabbit. "Sorry, I did not realize someone was here." Ceriss spoke Lhap, which was another surprise to the vulpine as well. The other surprise was that Ceriss made an incredibly attractive Lhap. Her long hair was bound behind her,

almost to her very fluffy tail, her thick, huge ears sleek and perfect, her eyes remained violet. She seemed to have to have used a lot of her ability to shift her form just in making her ears look the way they did, so changing her color was too hard with the short amount of time that she used.

“Hello there! I’ve never seen a white Lhap, you folks are from a different place, huh?” The brown lapine female moved over to the two foxes, her little dewdrop tail fluttering a little with nervous excitement. Fortunately, she did not seem afraid.

“We come from Amani, an island there called Diera.” Ceriss wanted to be truthful at least to that, even if disguising her form. “Do you know that place?” she asked. The rabbit shook her head.

“I do not.” She spoke somewhat sadly, perhaps realizing she would not be of much help.

“Is there anyone who might know? We are not... likely to be able to get back home otherwise.” Ceriss seemed to be close to tears. It was an act and the real fox knew it.

“I... I think our magistrate might know.” She pulled at her silver necklace a little. The lapine turned, facing the town, her little bells jingling. “I can take you there, but please take care to be polite. Our town is pretty traditional. Outsiders can’t make demands or be rude, you will get pushed right back out onto the street.” Neph was actually relieved by that. His bigger worry was that the sight of them would get a spear in their throat. Just being run out of town was not as bad a fate.

“We can be polite, I assure you.” Neph spoke. In his homeland the males were equal to the females, so he did not wish to betray that notion by constantly deferring to Ceriss. “I’m Neph, and this is Ceriss.” The rabbit bowed back, seeming to share or at least quickly pick up that custom. She spoke up softly,

“I’m Vernicia.” She began to move over to the town. Neph thought to himself quietly as he listened to the birds calling loudly in the trees which were ruffled high above them, the heat not dissipated as well by his large ears because of the lack of wind in the forest. The land they were in seemed peaceful enough, given the lack of walls, the kindness to strangers, and the willingness to help. Would the Letai have simply stayed in this place because of the lack of war? How long had this peace been here? Or was it just that the people were strong enough that they had very little to fear? It was not long before they got to the town to find that it was very much alive and rather busy.

There were tracts of land to the north of town where rows of trees with the fruit they had been eating were cultivated and growing, and a very green kind of

sectioned reed-like plant, similar to bamboo was growing in the specific form of barriers, carefully bent and twisted and wrapped to form the walls of buildings, and even the form of the roof-tops with white stone panels which curved upward in cathedral-like fashion. It was designed to send the water off the top of the seemingly living houses as fast as possible. The walls were divided outward, spreading, then dipping back in so that windows were formed like long oval ports covered by glass and sealed with some kind of likewise glassy substance. The doors were created by simply leaving a section in the wall, and then topping usually with wood or stone, and there was always writing in this section, perhaps giving some idea of who lived there, or what kind of shop it was

There were little trenches dug around each home lined with stones which held water that had perhaps run down as rain. This seemed to keep the plants that the houses were made out of strong. A few of the houses were lined along the walls up to a certain height with carved and patterned stone, but the effect was more visual than practical. These changes were just for decoration to make the homes which were otherwise all fairly green into more original designs, and give them some distinction. Bent into their proper shapes, the actual canopies of these plants were formed into covered walkways, hanging gardens, and other features around the town. It seemed like the strange oversized reed-like plants were used for almost everything that was built, but there was extensive stonework and metalwork used for enough that it was obvious that these practices were not lacking for this society.

Everyone wore the same delicate, shimmering fabrics in a wide variety of colors. It seemed far more festive than the typical colors used in Amani, but the styles were almost provocative for the females, while the larger, stronger-looking male lapines wore a bit more covering outfits, shirts and long pants, but no one wore shoes. Their large feet seemed happiest bare. Neph had never seen such a paradise of a town as this appeared to be. The entire town smelled of fruit and incense, herbs from the herb garden and a clean ocean breeze.

"Your town is beautiful." Ceriss had no trouble stating what Neph deeply felt. "I think I have never seen a place that compares. You live here so I don't know if you ever stop noticing, but you should all be proud of the home you've made for yourself here." The rabbit turned around, walking backward, smiling brightly.

"It would please the magistrate that you notice! Our town is small, but we take care of it. We've been here for six generations, right on the ocean. The weather has been kind, and the jungle has been generous." Ceriss looked around with obvious amazement. Was she thinking what Neph was? If the Letai came here... what would they have gone back for? Why would they have ever considered returning on the off chance that they could not come back here?

“Have you ever had other visitors from where we came from?” Ceriss asked. Neph felt a little thrill as he realized that he was on the same level of thinking as she was.

“We have our emissaries go over the sea occasionally to those places, but that’s not my area of knowledge. We are not in open dealings across the sea. It’s a hard place with wastelands, they tell us, and we don’t need to expand in that direction.” Ceriss gave a nervous glance to Neph. The question had been reversed. She had not answered, only stated that they sent people of their own across the sea. The lands east over the sea were called wastelands? Well, they certainly did not yield the kind of fertility this place did, but it was hardly a wasteland. Perhaps the emissaries were too far south or north, and had not seen Amani before? That was hard to believe though. It was populated, even if sparsely, across almost all the available shoreline on that continent. Neph looked over to the girl and shrugged.

“It’s not really a wasteland where we are from at least. But I can assure you it’s not like this.” He motioned toward all the sights they were seeing. He felt bad that his new friends were just hanging out in the forest, waiting when confronted with this splendor. He was certain there was some kind of dark secret waiting around the corner. As they rounded the corner there was, instead, a central stone fire pit filled with glowing embers and a metal screen upon it. On top of this they found lots of different kinds of food cooking, predominantly vegetables, but a few kinds of grilled fruit as well. They did not seem to have much of a liking for meat based on what was cooking, but the grilled roots were seasoned with brine of some kind, and sweetened to a degree that made the scent alluring even to the fox.

“Help yourself, I will go and find the magistrate.” The lady lapine said, nodding toward the grilling food. There were a few people cooking, but it was not evident who really owned the food. Then, the realization hit Neph that they *all* owned it. This was the very opposite of a dark secret. No one seemed to want for necessities here. Ceriss did not need to be told twice. She wanted to try a little of about everything. Some of it she didn’t care for, but most of it was delicious even for a wolf. There were a few very spicy things that Neph liked. They took a broad leaf that they put their selections on and sat on a low wall that circled the center of town that everyone seemed to like to park themselves on when not busily helping with about everything in town.

“What d’ ye think?” Neph asked Ceriss. “Ya have an eye fer things like danger and conflict. What do ye think?” he asked. Ceriss looked around, her massive ears lying flat.

“They are utterly at peace.” She said this somewhat anxiously.

“Why does that seem t’ bother yeh?” he asked.

“Only two things cause this level of harmony.” The tone of her voice made her seem very wise. How old was Ceriss really? Neph had no idea what her real form even was.

“Those are?” he asked. She seemed to know a lot of things about how the world worked, of that he was certain. He was secretly glad he ended up having her with him. He was sure he would have found some way to foul things up here. The priestess answered very softly, keenly aware of how much larger ears could hear now that she had them.

“The first way this can happen is if there were just a pure and sincere culture of peace, where unkindness, greed, avarice, and those sorts of things are unthinkable crimes. That’s a lifestream society.” She nodded to those helping themselves to food, and a few others bringing food from their gardens. “Everyone helps everyone and no one thinks there’s any other way. It’s ingrained from birth. Why struggle when cooperation and peace are easier and leave you more time for pleasurable pursuits? Everyone works, no one tries to take advantage, and everyone at least has some measure of happiness even if there is very rarely a real level of decadence. Opulence is determined by how you see yourself, not how much you gain, and the only way to see yourself as better is for you to be more useful and more valuable. Everyone works hard and strives for that level of respect in their village. The worst thing that can happen to you is to be banished, unwanted or unneeded.” Neph widened his eyes.

“That sounds absolutely wonderful. It... It pains me that things are neh like tha’ back at home.” He looked at Ceriss. “Is that how the Letai was, way back?” he asked.

“No.” Ceriss said flatly. “We’d have liked to be, but in all honestly, we were too meddlesome, and needed to be involved in other people’s problems all the time to keep the tenuous peace where we lived. If we lived alone and no one had ever experienced real suffering... Maybe we could have one day had that, but it was never like that for us. Our duty was to ease suffering, so that was perhaps never to be our world. We needed others to take care of, and those who fought, killed, suffered and hated needed us the most. That makes this kind of life well out of our reach.” The fox gritted his teeth. Ceriss was pretty harsh on the reality of her people but her honesty impressed him.

“So, what’s th’ other possible reason fer this paradise?” Neph whispered softly. Ceriss lowered her head, ears flattening more as if trying to hide behind them.

“Heavy, heavy tyranny.” The words echoed in Neph’s head.

"This dunnah look like oppression, Ceriss." The vulpine looked about, his own slightly smaller ears flattening.

"That's the thing, Neph..." Ceriss whispered softly to the young Lhap. "Tyranny and paradise look, on the surface the same. If you make a mistake in paradise, you are forgiven, taught better, and held closer. If tyranny is the cause, you are cast out, no one wants anything to do with a disruption of their carefully placed order. It looks beautiful but can get really ugly really quick." Neph remembered what the girl said about being polite or one can be thrown out. Were there hundreds of laws and customs that could place them in danger if they unwittingly broke them?

"Which does this look like t' ye'?" asked the real fox.

"I can't tell yet, but what I can tell you... is that there are essence-users among them, and that means that some of them can see the essence. I might not be able to hide my power from them." Neph gasped slightly.

"They might know yer nerry a fox?" he asked.

"No, I can hide my form, but I can't hide my power if I am keeping this form. They will know that I'm a powerful essence user. More powerful than normal for this place from what I've seen. That might make us seem like a threat." She seemed genuinely worried.

"How much of a difference is there? Is it tha' noticeable?" Neph asked.

"A glass of water versus a fountain." Ceriss was very blunt.

"It's nice to see a fox or two here off season." The soft words took them both off guard, and they visibly flinched. Neph looked up. There was a bent old male rabbit leaning on a gnarled cane looking up at them. He was so old that he was actually shorter than the vulpine pair, as stooped as he was.

"Hello there." Neph spoke first in Lhap. Ceriss added to it.

"We had not intended to be here, but we certainly do not regret the hospitality we have found. We do not wish to be a burden. We merely seek information on the best way for us to return home." There was a measured gaze from the old lapine staring at the white fox, his ears folded back as if they were just too tired to be up any more.

"It is my understanding that you come from the east, across the sea." The old rabbit had already been told that much, it seemed.

"This is true." Ceriss stated. "It's a long journey and we were displaced by a storm. We've never been here before."

"You may never be able to leave." The rabbit seemed pretty sure of that. "Travel across the sea is very, very treacherous. Only a few seem to be able to make it there and back, and they don't have the best things to say about the lands beyond. If you wish to make the journey, you would not be able to do it alone." There was a pause from Ceriss. Neph inwardly groaned. He knew it. They would be trapped, prisoners either of the natives, or of the location itself.

"The wind and currents do not easily allow passage, huh?" asked Ceriss. The old rabbit nodded.

"Indeed. It's a fool's errand to go when worse awaits you there than you have here." That seemed to strike a chord with the priestess. She sighed softly and took another bite of food. It was too delicious not to eat even in a funk.

"So, do you think anyone knows a way that was possible? I am sure some must have made it to bring back unfortunate stories. Even if we get into a wasteland territory far from home, at least we would be over the ocean." She seemed to want some encouragement. Neph wanted to encourage her, but simply knew no way to do so.

"It is possible, there's a fellow in the valley who says he can do it, but he's a bit odd, I don't think you will want any part of that one." The older lapine suggested, rubbing one of his ears backward. Ceriss perked up.

"Is it hard to get to where he is from here?" she asked.

"It's not exactly safe, but I imagine a spry couple of foxes could do it, sure." He stated. Ceriss stood up, wagging her tail a bit, and the elderly fellow before them held his hands crossed before him, gazing at the beautiful fox. At least, that's what it looked like, and Neph sure could not keep his eyes off of her. She was stunning. However, the pair just stared at each other, and Ceriss' expression hardened.

"What makes the guy so odd?" asked Neph curiously, wanting to break the awkward silence.

"Doesn't matter, if he might know a way for us to return to our homeland, I am all for it." said Ceriss. Neph flattened his ears cautiously. Ceriss was not normally one to take risks. Did something seem out of place to her? The slightly smaller male vulpine looked around, and then back at the older rabbit, who was very shrewdly looking at Ceriss.

"You would surely like to stay the night, it is getting late, and the winds at night blow cold out of the valley." He stood up a little taller. "We would be happy to have your company." Neph looked at Ceriss, who seemed hesitant. He wished he could read her mind to know what made her want to skip a restful sleep in a safe town.

"I am not able to do what you probably think I can do." The priestess spoke in a slow, careful tone.

"Oh, I am pretty sure you can." The grey bent creature leaned forward again and grinned. "If you desire any help getting home, that is. It will be awfully hard if no one will as much as talk with you." Neph widened his eyes, realizing suddenly that things were not going in a positive direction.

"Would you have me just trust you that when my task is done you will part with me? Or will I be ever at your disposal to help where you see fit?" she asked. Her eyes narrowed.

"You think me wrong, life-singer." The rabbit stood up slowly. "It is not your continued services we seek. Just a one-time favor that would aid us quite nicely.

"Life singer... So you have encountered those with my power before?" Ceriss asked. Neph's heart sank. The rabbit knew she was a powerful essence user, just as she had feared. Somehow, the highly perceptive Letai automatically knew that she would be forced to do some kind of work for the village. What would they ask of her?

"Those with power like yours, they like to hide it, but there's ways to know." He hobbled toward Ceriss. "I want you to soften my pain first, to know that you do not merely use this aura to push away curious onlookers."

"That's not the power I have." Ceriss stated. "Mine is not the healing kind. I hurt people with my power, and I have no intention of using it here." Ceriss narrowed her eyes and bared her teeth. "But you knew that, that's why you asked me to do that, you keen old codger." She crossed her arms. "I'll do no killing. Look at this place. You see the peace? Why would you ask me to harm that?" she asked.

"Quiet, fox!" barked the rabbit. "It will not do for the legend you leave behind to have the villagers see us quarrelling." Neph perked his ears. Legend? Were they going to be asked to do something great?

"Very well, I will hear you out, what is it you want?" Ceriss asked, leaning back against a bamboo-like wall. The other fox ground his teeth a bit. These two were very intense for being rather cute to look at. The elderly rabbit folded his

ears far back and inhaled deeply, before leaning back against the wall beside Ceriss.

"From this place, close to the town square, you can see every part of our fair village. Is there anything missing, life singer?" he asked. Neph scratched his head. Hearing it in his own tongue did not make it seem any less cryptic. Ceriss looked around a while, her eyes narrow, her brow furrowed in wisdom and thought. She finally spoke slowly.

"You offer no monument to your dead, for one. No graves, no markers, no hint that you have death, but I do not sense so much life essence in you to consider that the end never comes. You inter them in fire?" she asks.

"We never get the chance. If one of us falls, it comes for them, and none who intend to stand after dare to interfere." Neph's blood suddenly felt like ice.

"It would be the little problem you want me to solve." Ceriss stated. "I have trouble believing you have ever met someone with the gifts that I have. How do you know I can do it?" she asked. The other vulpine felt quite left out of this.

"You smell of death, Ceriss. I knew it the moment I came close to you. You can affect the spirits. Even being a part of the river of life is not enough to separate an enemy from you." The priestess narrowed her eyes.

"How can you know this?" she asked. She seemed distressed.

"Some of us can see. Some of us knew before you came. You will not leave us in the state we are in, and none after you will do much good." He tapped his cane on the ground. Ceriss growled, which sounded kind of cute from a fox form of her.

"We have very big problems we are dealing with in our own homes. Can you see how those will turn out if we are stuck here helping with yours?" she asked. "You do not appear to be doing poorly." She waved a hand to express everything there.

"The solution to this problem is the easiest solution to you going home. Our destinies cross here. You should be grateful that there is a clear path." Neph put his fingers to his lips, the fox thinking this sounded like a very wise thing to say.

"I know of only one thing that does the thing that you say, and it is not an easy thing to deal with." Ceriss seemed to know more than she wanted to let on to Neph, perhaps worrying that this would frighten him. That frightened him. He shifted his weight back and forth from one foot to the other. What about the

others? What if the commander did not want anything to do with the kind of trouble that this would obviously be?

“You and your friends will find a way.” Ceriss gritted her teeth tightly. Neph put a hand on his chest. They thought they had been so careful, but had they been watched all along? This innocent little town was far better defended than the pair had thought.

“How long have you waited?” asked Ceriss.

“The entire time.” The lapine answered.

“What’s your name?” the Lhap-disguised wolf asked. Things were moving almost too fast for Neph to follow. Was this kind of conversation so typical to the Letai of old that they did not have any trouble dealing with how chaotic and scary all of this was, or was it only Ceriss who had dealt with that? He knew that she was a bit more hardened than most from what Leal had been talking to her about on the raft, but surely she was not this hardened by what she experienced alone. The rabbit smiled finally and stated in a low, soft tone,

“I am Wahkeme.” He leaned forward again. “You will aid us?” he asked.

“You already know that.” Ceriss growled coldly.

“We will both be happy.” The codger smiled.

“Perhaps, but for all that you know, you know how I will react if I have been deceived...” She narrowed her eyes. Neph felt his heart fall to his feet. Ceriss would threaten this lovely and innocent village? That didn’t seem necessary.

“You will not be deceived, but understand... Even with our help the path which lies before you to get home when this task is done will be difficult, and deadly.” He frowned at Ceriss.

“This... Sounds exactly like the truth.” She smiled and nodded back to the rabbit and he smiled and nodded back. All Neph could think, as he watched them stare each other down, was that both were quite mad. What had they all just been volunteered to do?

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 17

Neph tried to catch up to Ceriss as she moved rather quickly into the forest toward the small, sheltered camp that they thought had been a complete secret, but they had not accounted for someone who knew so much like Wahkeme seemed to. Was it an act? Surely it could not be. He knew very specific things, and even the priestess seemed alarmed. Neph panted softly, arriving back at camp finally, to find it nearly empty. Ceriss looked furtively around, seeing only Kaji sitting at a very small fire with thick palm leaves over it to disperse the smoke to a point. He was heating some water.

"Where are Neit and Lunaris?" she asked, seeming displeased that anyone had ventured off while they were investigating the nearby town. Kaji murmured softly,

"It's alright, they're heading to th' stream ta gather more water, and t' bathe. I sent Lunaris to keep an eye on our young lady friend 'cause I didn't want her bathin' alone with whatever dropped that tooth possibly lurking about." He noted. There was a soft shuffle of the leaves overhead, signs that the wind was changing to a night time land breeze. "Who's your friend, Neph, she's kinda cute." Ceriss grumped.

"You know full well who I am, Kaji." The priestess crossed her arms.

"I like what ye've done with yer ears." The captain of the lost ship stated coyly. Ceriss shook her head.

"We will have matters to discuss when the others get back." The faux-fox stated. Neph sat down beside the priestess. "For the time being, we will wait here. It's pointless to start discussing these matters when I will just have to repeat them in full when the others get here. You should have stayed together, I do not care to waste time. The Sons of Sorrow are not likely to be without other plans to cause harm to the city, and are likely pretty angry about the crystal." She sighed, leaning back against a tree, sitting on the soft, spongy ground of the tropical forest they found themselves camping in.

"You kin change back ye' know." Kaji murmured in a tone that might have been intended to be helpful. It came out as slightly uncomfortable. Ceriss raised an eyebrow.

"Do I not make a lovely fox?" she asked. Neph looked back and forth between her and his captain, watching the pair.

"Yer a fine fox, Ceriss, ah jest..." He looked at Neph, then looked down a bit, and chuckled softly. "I was hopin' to still get my hands on you, a promise an' all, and like this... It's like I'm takin' advantage of Neph's mum." Ceriss' eyes went wide at that, and Neph went scarlet. Not much could embarrass the fox, but that was more than enough. Ceriss did not look much like his actual mother, but that it caused Kaji issues was, he felt, pretty funny. He got over the embarrassing shock of the revelation and laughed. Ceriss spoke up.

"And here I was about to grant you that favor, but I have to stay in this disguise in case we are watched from afar..." Ceriss grinned icily at Kaji, who widened his eyes in distress.

"Tha'taint fair at all, an yew know it!" Kaji whimpered. "I'll ner' cash in my favor under them circumstances. It won't feel right!" He looked with a panicked expression to Neph, perhaps for support. The fox grinned stupidly. This was a very funny thing to watch. Kaji was kind, if sometimes crude and rough with him, but it was good to see him get some licks.

"Well, I can't go denying my promises, and these circumstances are what caused such a promise in the first place. You cannot complain given the opportunity?" Ceriss asked, slipping up a little closer to the dark-furred wolf.

"Yeh kin offer all yew want, but I kin wait!" he barked.

"It'll be fun, Kaji!" Neph laughed. "She's small and easy to handle! You like short girls in town, I have seen you chase them!"

"Petite! Petite!" Kaji barked. "This one's yer size! That's tiny! How's she e'en able to get that small as a disguise?!" Kaji scooted back a little, sitting against a leaning tree that had been half pinned back by a fallen tree that he was now sitting on.

"I put my mass in these ears and in my tail, and pull some of it to my core." Ceriss noted. "I still weigh the same. I'm still a wolf, and I'm still a Letai priestess. If I want this moment to be when I grant your favor, it will be." She grinned coldly at Kaji.

"Not if I'm sayin' no." The former captain crossed his arms defiantly. He was smiling, so Neph began to think this was a bit of banter whether the captain

really wanted that or not. Still, if he didn't want Ceriss to enjoy him in this form, there was not much she could do to him. At the moment, at least, the captain was two heads taller than her, and he was always physically larger, even when she was a wolf. Neph looked at Ceriss again, his ears perking. Did she have a good comeback to that? Sometimes it was fun watching how others interacted. Neph preferred simple interaction, and the somewhat forced pairing between the thief and the fox had been ideal to this end. He didn't have to think about it, he didn't have to chase Neit, he just had to pleasure her, and she did the same to him, and because of that, their friendship worked nicely. He suspected that if Kaji and Ceriss did the same, they might get along better. Ceriss narrowed her eyes, her grin on that lovely foxy face going from cold to absolutely wicked. Her eyes glowed violet. There was a soft 'gLk' sound from Kaji. Neph turned his head quickly, and he cupped his muzzle, having not expected what he'd see.

Sitting there on the fallen, rotting tree was still his captain, but there was a band of bluish light that coiled around his neck, then down around the back of the tree that was half-down behind him, then around his arms. He was pulled back somewhat unnaturally against the tree behind him, as if the bands of light were rope. His expression was shocked.

"Funny thing about your essence, if handled directly..." Ceriss murmured, standing up slowly and approaching the wolf pinned to the tree. "Your body does not like being separated from it, and your muscles react accordingly. If I pull, your muscles push. It's not easy to do, but I had some nice food, and I think I can manage."

"This isn't really necessary." Kaji's words were anxious, but he did not sound as strangled as he looked. The band of light was not squeezing him, it was just making his muscles keep him forced back. His airway was safe. It was more about visible paralysis than it was a physical force holding him back. This did not make Neph any less fearful of Ceriss' power. She had made her point though, right?

"It was never necessary..." Ceriss whispered to Kaji as she slowly untied the ribbon around the middle of her robes. Neph widened his eyes, as did the captain.

"At least switch back to the pretty white wolf..." Kaji whispered.

"No." Ceriss grinned, letting the robes fall away. They had been too long to begin with, so she was able to move easier without them. Her body was mostly petite, but as a means of distributing her mass, Ceriss left her chest a bit generous, where Lhap typically were not. This got a bit of a mouth-open gape from Neph. Kaji was less familiar with that being so unusual, but he looked mostly fearful about what this fox was about to do to him. He had mentioned that he'd prefer a wolf, but the sight before him was certainly not unpleasant.

“Ye’ really are gonna do this right in front of Neph?” Kaji panted out with some exasperation as small vulpine hands began to undo his trousers. Neph blushed, having not thought Kaji would be embarrassed by that, but ultimately, a few of the times at least, he’d watched the male fox play with Neit. It seemed strange that he would be embarrassed the other way around.

“Yes I am.” Ceriss’ reply was almost clinical, very calm and determined.

“I can’t stop ye can I?” asked the wolf, his eyes half closed as his trousers were drawn down slowly. Neph widened his eyes a little to find that ebon length more than half rigid. He was not able to hide his arousal at the situation. That length only swelled more and more as the humid afternoon air caressed it.

“Not without hurting yourself.” Ceriss answered, slowly pulling up Kaji’s top. The bands of light were unresponsive to the fabric, so they did not get in the way. It was somewhat odd for Neph to see. He watched as Ceriss prohibited any further questions from Kaji by cupping her mouth to his, smaller than a wolf’s, but her tongue pushed easily past his teeth, and he seemed to tense up a lot. Did Kaji actually dislike foxes, or was there something else causing him this glitch? Was it really about Neph? He could not look away. He could not believe that Ceriss was actually forcing herself in this form on his captain. Was he wrong to allow it without resisting himself? After all, Kaji was already getting aroused. Did he really not want it? Ceriss finally broke the kiss, and moved a hand down to the mostly-seated captain’s lap, stroking his swelling girth in her gentle, small white hand.

“Do you hate me for this?” she asked, her expression hard to read. Was it sad? Was it concerned? Was it teasing? Neph could not tell. He squirmed a little in his own arousal. He wondered if his captain would forgive him if he made an attempt on Ceriss when she was done with him. Was that taboo? He didn’t know enough about Amanian culture to be sure. It would be frowned on where he was from, at least, as it might dishonor his captain.

“Why would I hate you fer this?” he asked.

“There’s a reason you shy away from interacting with a Lhap this way. You can’t deny it.” Her words were sage and careful. Neph looked at Kaji more intently.

“Not in front of Neph.” Kaji rumbled slowly.

“I will give you that, but you would do good to address it eventually.” She stroked Kaji to full arousal in the time she was talking to him. The true fox blinked at that. She was doing what exactly? Letai were incredible lovers, he’d

learned that much so far, but they were also renowned healers. Was this part of the healing Ceriss was trained to do? He did not really view her as a healer.

“Ye wish t’ help an’ I love ye fer that, but it in’ all that bad, I assure ya.” Kaji tried to speak of this dismissively. The disguised priestess put her hand under Kaji’s chin, and then to his throat.

“Let me be blunt, captain...” Her words were icy, and the dark wolf’s thickened shaft twitched a bit in her hand. Neph backed up a bit. Priestesses were scary. She leaned in close, “... I am not doing this to honor a bet or any special heartfelt lover’s promise. There will be plenty of time for *that* when we are safely back on friendly shores. But things will be very dangerous for us soon if we are to get anywhere, and I need your *life*, not your approval. And the best energy I will get from you will be gained when you are not lamenting your personal reservations about how I look at the moment.” She put her claw-tips around the wolf’s scrotum. Neph gritted his teeth, and Kaji gasped. Oddly, he only perked up again, rather than deflating. Ceriss folded those huge ears back curiously, looking down. She then grinned wickedly at what the effect had been. Fully aroused, his dark flesh did not look like it would even fit inside a fox, easily 11 inches, and quite thick as it twitched against her palm.

“Shit...” the captain grunted as those claw-tips seemed to tighten.

“Oh, I see...” Her hand slipped back up that dark shaft and slid back down, drawing a nice coat of slick pre down his length with it. Ceriss leaned forward a little and growled to him as she stroked him generously, making Neph just a little jealous. “So *that’s* what happened. Chose the wrong time to show up on the wrong island.” She pushed her claws up along his chest and rather abusively pinched one of the wolf’s dark nipples through the lighter fur along his chest. He winced, writhing, seeming to be agonized by that. Neph was dumfounded. What, by the lifestream itself, was the priestess doing? They weren’t supposed to delight in hurting people.

“Quiet, ya couldn’t know.” Kaji validated, at least somewhat, the words that the priestess uttered. Ceriss leaned in and *bit* Kaji’s shoulder, making him grunt in pain, but that was followed by a groan that Neph could not mistake as her palm cupped his wet cock-tip. The actual fox stepped closer. Did his captain like being hurt by Ceriss? That was not what he expected. Ceriss spoke softly.

“I have heard, even long ago, the Lhap had an island where those who wish to suffer their mother’s moon in private can do so. It’s disruptive for them to stay in such a state because it’s hard for Lhap to resist the allure of those beauties when they want them the most, and if several fall prey to that timing regularly, it’s easier to keep them together where they won’t cause, say... accidents and other issues...” Neph blinked. She really did know about the Lhap. He was astonished that she could have known that. He spoke up.

“Our island fer that is called Karacota. It’s right b’side m’ own island.” He cupped his muzzle. “Kaji, ye didn’t go *there*, did ye’? Tha’s a terrible idea, they woulda been...” He then went scarlet. They would not have wanted Kaji there because it was a very private, sacred place where Kaji should not have been, and for a wolf to be there it would break so many taboos, but they would have been unable to help what they really needed to do to him. If he got stranded there in one of his failed expeditions, he might have been both abused, and ravaged, for weeks. The reality of it snapped into focus for Neph, and his ears burned from the level of blushing. Kaji sighed out with disdain.

“So yeah, ye kin make fun of it all yew want now, nosy little – HNNnn...” Ceriss twisted his nipples both in her fingertips as she growled to cut him off. Neph could understand what was happening now. He spent weeks with several of them, they likely went back and forth between beating him silly for his trespassing there, and fucking him raw because he was a wolf and they knew there would be no consequences while satisfying their primal urges that would have been painfully intense at the time. Not all the Lhap had such a physical problem with it, some could more or less ignore it, but there were always three or four or so that became quite distressed and uncomfortable. Those would definitely have been the ones on Karacota. Did Kaji mentally link Ceriss’ abuse with the aggressive sex he found there? That was just shameful. Another realization dawned on Neph as he watched Ceriss twist her cupped palm over his sensitive wet glans.

“Wait, you came back.” He looked stunned at Kaji. “You came back to the islands and that’s when you met me. It weren’t the first time you had been there. Ye’ said ye were recovering from bein’ sick, but you was flat *exhausted*, you dog! Ye been to Karacota takin’ advantage of the foxes!” Kaji groaned. Neph was a little taken aback, but the wolf had otherwise been pretty straight with him. He was coming to his islands for business and pleasure. But why take a fox crewmate? He knew the answer before he even finished asking it in his head. “Ye’ took me on as ah crewmate so ye had a right proper reason t’ be goin’ back!” He crossed his arms, and then grinned a bit as Ceriss gave him another pinch to his nipples as he tried to explain himself to the fox. He deserved it!

“You’ve been a very naughty thing, knowin’ those foxes were not able to resist.” The priestess slipped down onto her knees before Kaji. Neph narrowed his eyes. Why was she still pleasuring this wolf, he had insulted the sanctity of his homeland. Did she intend to just tease his arousal to a fever pitch, and drop him? Kaji panted, speaking up.

“I’ll have ye’ know, Neph, I’m good friends with more’n a few of tha’ ladies I met there, and I were requested back by them. I came back cause they wanted me t’ be comin’ back, not cause I like havin’ no respect fer them.” Neph crossed his arms uncomfortably. He could not be serious. “After th’ first time, I learned m’

lesson, and stuck to trade with the correct island, but one of em tracked me down at port, and there we go. I never intended to be insultin' no one or breaking rules and customs, Neph, if'n ye don't believe me, I kin take you t' see the three that invited me. Honor o' the sea, Neph. They needed me, an' I shore liked being needed." Neph sighed. If the wolf had been banned from doing it again, he supposed he would have heard of the incident, but nothing was ever said. That meant that the ones it happened with kept it a secret. The best reason for them to keep that secret is to allow it to happen again.

"When we git back, I will be askin' them, so you know, but yer off the hook for now. But Ceriss, you don't gotta be gentle with Kaji. He likes his foxes just... like... this." Neph grinned icily at his captain. He found some personal enjoyment in this. Ceriss immediately drew her shorter form up against Kaji and growled pleasantly. The bands of light glowed a little brighter, her 'grip' on him apparently tightening as he seemed to flex against that energy.

"There we go, that little bit of unpleasantness is out of the way in a moderated fashion. Now then, we can move forward with this..." She reached under her lap, grasping Kaji's masculinity as she slipped up tighter against him, stroking him against the bare pink flower of her desire. Neph swallowed, having not been prepared for just how alluring Ceriss was when aroused as a fox. He didn't have the guts to ask if this play extended to him, since Neit had drained him so nicely already.

"How did you know... there was an issue with foxes?" Kaji asked breathlessly, his feet parting and planting tightly against the leafy ground. Ceriss bit at his shoulder softly, giving a honey-sweet growl before sinking back, pulling him back and forth over those petals and pushing and lifting her hand under herself. She stroked him against herself with the apparent intent of pleasuring them both, and for how wet she was, it seemed to play its effect out nicely on her as much as it did the slick, twitching member of the former ship's captain.

"I didn't." Ceriss growled back to the wolf, who tightened up a bit. "But, everyone's got interesting secrets and the way you looked when you saw me in this form, I just had to know. You see..." Ceriss leaned in and pumped Kaji a little faster, her hand wetter with her heat and his pre. "... Before the war got bad, before it was obvious that the Letai were not handling it well, my purpose was to purge dark emotions, to strike down desperate sadness. I was the one people went to when they were hurting, and I would help heal them, through talk, through touch..." Her hand sank down and she gripped Kaji's sack, claws pushing into the flesh tightly, making him wince and whine loudly. "... Or through abuse if that's what it took." Kaji's leg was shaking as Neph watched her hand glide back up to stroke his cock again, a mixing of pleasure and pain.

"Aye, then ye've done this b'fore?" Kaji asked, huffing out in pleasure before grunting again with a bite to his shoulder, Ceriss teasing her sex with his

wet tip again. Neph inhaled and exhaled in deeper, longer breaths. He could smell her. She even smelled of fox. The musk was unmistakable. He had assumed that she might have taken the form she had with little experience, and that was amazing to him, but how close she got things like her scent, the real fox began to think that she might have been around the Lhap island foxes quite a bit. Perhaps she had intimate knowledge of them. The idea of it made him only hotter still.

Kaji did not try to speak again. It seemed everything he said was immediately punctuated by the infliction of pain. Still, Ceriss seemed happy to mix the two whether he spoke or not. She would lean down and cup his cock against her tummy as she nipped his nipples or she would pull his hair back, exposing his neck and biting him as she pushed his masculinity a bare inch into her tight sex, or she would grab his throat and push him back and growl at him threateningly as she mashed her puffy aroused folds against the underside of his trapped member.

What Neph became the most aware of in the process of this was that Ceriss was not just taking her time, she was drawing it out. Every time the wolf would seem to be getting too much pleasure out of it, or begin breathing harder or pushing his hips to meet the pleasure of whatever little bit of intensity the priestess was allowing, she would slow, stop outright, or inflict pain upon him. This was a practice that he had never seen before. Was she still teasing him, with no intent of letting him climax? The fox was not mad at Kaji anymore, so he would not want to see Kaji suffer that kind of fate. On one of the downgrades of attention that the fox-disguised priestess forced upon the excited captain, he gave a long and plaintive, frustrated whine that Neph could understand because even he felt frustrated, as if it was his own arousal that was being tortured.

“What’s wrong, Kaji? Do you want to be inside me?” Ceriss asked with a caring, tender, but very thickly teasing voice. Kaji audibly swallowed. There was a hot shiver through his body, and he nodded vigorously, as much as the band of light restraining his neck to the leaning tree would allow. Ceriss growled pleasantly. “What do you think it feels like in there? How hot and tight is a vixen’s body when compared to a wolf, Kaji?” Her voice drew out the last letter of his name to an apparent begging tone. Neph shivered at that. Foxes were about two degrees warmer generally than wolves because of their size, making them quite a bit warmer, and he could only imagine how much tighter Ceriss might seem in this form. Kaji whimpered again, not daring to speak lest he offend his captor.

“Foxes are warmer.” Neph offered since no one else spoke a moment while Ceriss ran her thumb in quick little circles at the underside of the tip of the wolf’s thick, soaking cock, pre dribbling copiously as the lady fox teased him. She gave an icy look to the fox, making it obvious that he did not need to answer for his captain. He stood up strait to look obedient and then winced, his arousal

not favoring standing straight, making him bow again. Kaji began to push his hips up and down slowly into the pleasure that the almost invisible motion of that thumb was causing. Ceriss grinned sinfully at the wolf pinned against the mossy tree.

“Feeling nice? Enjoying thinking about being pushed deep inside me Kaji?” she asked lustfully. He nodded emphatically. Ceriss leaned in closer, whispering, “Would you like to feel it now?” she asked, drawing out the last word again hotly. Kaji nodded immediately, a heated whine escaping his lips as he visibly throbbed in Ceriss’ grasp. The temporarily fox priestess growled in a darker tone, “Would you still want it even if I hurt you while I was doing it?” Neph felt an almost painful wave of lust pulse inside him, his cock straining against the fabric of his trousers. He sat right down on the leafy ground, unable to stand. The fox folded his ears back with disbelief. He was shocked not only at the suggestion from Ceriss, but also in how intensely aroused it made him. Was this priestess joking? Surely he would not agree to that. Kaji whimpered pitifully and nodded his head again.

“Oh my...” Neph half-whispered. Ceriss leaned forward and the fox held his breath as he watched her bite Kaji on his left arm near his shoulder, hard enough to make him cry out, but her hips pushed down slowly and evenly, and that dark cock-flesh spread her puffy pink folds wide around it and vanished entirely into her squeezing, clutching depths. Neph felt almost dizzy with arousal. The wolf-turned-vixen pulled her hips up slowly, teeth still tightly gripping Kaji, making him groan as his mind obviously seemed to cycle between the pleasure and pain. Those vulpine hips pushed wetly back down, the squish of that penetration clearly audible to Neph’s large ears. Then again she rose and fell, and again, keeping a deliberate and slow pace. If he moved his hips, Ceriss either stopped with just his tip inside her, that thick dark wolf-cock twitching as she seemed to bite him harder, at least from the sounds he made. The priestess had complete control of the speed at which she pleased Kaji. Neph could not help but push his hands together in his lap, rubbing his arousal slowly, his tail flitting back and forth behind him in pleasure. It was impossible to watch this otherwise. Ceriss pulled her mouth away from Kaji, and held her hips, positioned solidly just above his lap with his tip still wedged in her steamy depths.

“Did you like that, Kaji? How did I feel pushing you to the hilt inside me, lover?” she hissed. Her words sounded almost angry, but her sadistic smile suggested great enjoyment. Kaji weakly wagged his tail, his cock twitching hard again and again with the tip inside Ceriss. The twitching continued to stoke his pleasure, but not enough to raise it. The white-furred vulpine in his lap lifted off of him fully, and went back to slowly stroking his flesh. He whined as if she was inflicting pain again, but it was merely brought on by the end to his pleasure.

“Please take me again...” Kaji begged. This struck Neph pretty hard, as he was used to hearing his captain give orders, not plead with someone. This

only made the Letai Priestess seem more powerful. Ceriss put a hand to Kaji's throat, making him actually squeak. Her bands of light did not make it harder for him to breathe, but her hand certainly did. She seemed very unnaturally strong for her size. Neph pushed hands into his lap harder. His need for pleasure was becoming almost painful, and it was impossible to hide that. Fortunately, Ceriss had her back to him, so neither she nor Kaji could really see he was grinding away at his still clothed cock.

"If I take you again, I shall hurt you again. Is this what you desire, Kaji? Do you want me to hurt you?" she whispered into the essence-restrained wolf's ear, seemingly intentionally loud enough for Neph to hear. Kaji nodded. Neph blushed hotly as he realized that he had also nodded. Ceriss lifted Kaji's head, hand under his chin, looking sternly into his eyes. "Don't nod. *Tell me.* Tell me you want me to hurt you." Neph's heart raced. This was both the darkest, and most arousing thing he'd ever seen. He thought he had known the greatest heights of lust with Neit on the raft, but Ceriss was in a completely different world from Neit. He felt the soft thrumming pleasure of his building climax, and he rubbed himself a little more evenly as his hips rolled slowly. He barely had to do anything, and knew that he'd climax. He didn't care if he'd be taking his trousers to the sea in a few moments. Kaji paused a bit, seeming not at all certain how to ask for something like that, but when Ceriss' sex was drawn away from his cock again, he croaked out in a strained voice,

"Please hurt me, Ceriss... If it means bein' deep in you, I want you to hurt me, keep hurting me, I dun care, just dun stop touching me." Ceriss grinned at him.

"Good Kaji. Remember that." She then pushed her mouth opposite of the side she bit before, planted her hands at his back, and ripped her claws tightly over his flesh through his fur as she bit into him, making him cry out loudly in pain. Then her hips sank again, and this time she used heavier, faster strokes for a while. His barks of pain were mixed with frantic panting and groans of pleasure as she alternated between clawing his back, bouncing her hips, holding still on top of him with his cock in deep or barely in at all. Every time his breathing seemed to suggest he might be near climax, the fox riding hard in his lap would increase her painful attentions, or just decrease the pleasurable ones. Ceriss would snarl or scold Kaji to punctuate certain pains or pleasures, and if he tried to move himself, it was always punished.

"I can't keep..." Kaji tried to speak but was bitten quite savagely by the fox on him. She held her hips up, keeping only his tip inside herself, and moved a hand down to stroke his sack, then up and down his member. She took her teeth off of him, but drew him out completely again, getting a loud whimper from the captain. However, she did not stop pleasuring the wolf. She rubbed the tip of his cock rapidly up and down at her slick, sticky folds. Her hips shuddered

suddenly, and the wetness tripled in an instant as the priestess climaxed, using Kaji's cock as a toy to finish herself off.

"Oh by the lights..." groaned Neph. Kaji tightened up.

"I'm about to..." he cried, obviously fearing punishment if he let go without permission. Ceriss growled out coldly,

"Don't you dare." She played with his cock harder, strumming her clit with the tip side to side, up and down, grinding it tightly to her sex, shaking hotly as she perhaps released again, but Neph could not be sure.

"Ahaah! I kinna hold it!" he cried.

"I will absolutely wound you if you don't!" Ceriss' tone was murderous. Neph groaned. "Same goes for you, fox!" the priestess hissed. Neph whimpered and moved his hands back behind him. As the male vulpine watched, she turned around in front of him, her eyes upon him, not caring to bite or savage Kaji anymore, only to threaten him as she continued to rub him against her. His legs shook uncontrollably. "Take your trousers off, you little sneak." She was panting openly in pleasure. Neph did as she was told, glad to have them off, but fearful that it would just open him up to abuse. Kaji might like pain, but he did not think he cared for it. "On your knees, and put your hands behind your back and hold the base of your tail as tight as you can. Don't let go of it."

"I'm gonna..." croaked Kaji, still being fluttered against fox pussy.

"Neph. Watch." Ceriss' command was very clear as she lowered her hips suddenly, taking the wolf all the way in, hitting him inside her with a loud slap of her thighs, and then bouncing fully off of him. She gripped his cock just outside her sex, waited for a couple of seconds as a strained squeak came from behind her back, Kaji's legs tight, barely shaking, muscles painfully seized, and then a long, powerful blast of thick pearly lupine seed splashed Ceriss' pink folds copiously as a roar of pleasure escaped the wolf, and he was pushed in as deep as he could be again. Dark lupine thighs pushed up to meet downward mashing fox hips. There was another loud slap as they met, and he was pulled back out, sending another powerful streamer of thick fluid onto her splattered sex. Ceriss stroked Kaji's gushing cock once or twice in her hand to make him squirt all over her sex, and then took him in deep again, listening to his sinking groan. He strained against the bands of light that held him, perhaps wanting to grab that fox in his lap and fuck her within half an inch of her life, because that was sure what Neph wanted to do. His own member twitched violently as he watched the incredible release of his captain. Then, something unique happened. The band of light holding Kaji's throat release him and whipped forward, wrapping itself around the real fox's pink, twitching cock.

“Ceriss, I-“ he was going to tell her that he was not moving, but the next thing he felt was heat and stroking. The exact thing he assumed those bouncing thighs were making his captain feel, even though that ribbon of light was stationary, just wrapped around his cock. Regardless of how the illusion worked, Neph gave a silly-sounding squeak and fired one volley after another of his potent ribbons of fox seed all over the leaves between himself and Ceriss, his release so hard he could feel it in the base of his bushy fox tail as he gripped it tight and obediently. He watched Ceriss’ cruel face soften to utter bliss as she climaxed again around Kaji’s thick, throbbing meat, still likely squirting inside her.

“Good boys, both of you.” She spoke in a slow, savory tone, and the true fox flinched a little as he opened his eyes to see that hers were glowing. She was drawing essence heavily from them both. She had not been kidding about needing their energy. He wondered to himself just what it was that they were going to have to face.

“You seem like you have a lot on your mind, Luna.” Nita’s feathery tone shook the priestess from her musings. She looked back to the queen and smiled wistfully. Everyone was far better rested after a couple of days on the river. “Is everything alright?” Nita was very caring and obviously grateful to the priestess for doing all that she had to help her friends when they had been injured. The white-furred lady lupine sat up and spoke after a moment of reflection.

“It’s not a bad thing, no. I’m thinking a bit about where we are going. It’s somewhere I did not think I would be going so soon, and I know how much it would have changed, but to me it feels like I was just there a few months ago. I held onto my memories my homeland the most.” Nita put her hands in her lap and looked across the table to the priestess.

“Where are you referring to? The forbidden lands?” She spoke of areas that were completely under the dark one’s control. Luna shook her head slowly.

“No, not that specifically. I am referring to the temple where I used to live.” Nita perked her ears, regarding the robed priestess seriously.

“The Temple of Life? Do you think it still stands?” asked the Amanian queen. Luna leaned forward, resting her cheek on her hand, seeming comfortable and casual. In their respective terms, they were fairly equal in standing.

“That would be it. And enough still stands, I am sure, to suit our purposes. It’s not a place that travelers would generally happen upon by accident. One

must directly go there, and I think few would have reason. It would seem a small island in a very large, very cold, very deep lake. Without the essence that we used to have in such a vast quantity there, I suspect that place would have lost much of its greenery. The area would seem somewhat dead and dreary, but I am sure that the courtyard is still there and obvious. Much of the temple was destroyed when I attacked... When I attacked Vhale after Alps was cast into the Shadowfall. But the outside was likely left largely intact.” Nita smiled at that. It meant a lot to her that she would be married to Alps in his former home, broken though it may be.

“Actually...” A voice rang out from the other side of the open door. “Your temple is possibly in better shape than you remember.” Nita looked up, her heart racing a bit when she realized Vhale was standing there. Luna had just spoken of one of his worst acts.

“I am fully aware of how much damage I did trying to splatter your carcass all over my island, Vhale. I’d be surprised if anything still lived there.” Luna did not seem angry, however. She seemed to treat Vhale as if it were just a bit of a falling out they had, not the near genocide of their race.

“Actually you did kill every living thing but me.” He sat at the table to Nita’s right. The queen tensed up a bit. Luna seemed to forgive Mannus, but she did not. “You used a forbidden essence ability as a last hurrah, if you will.” The queen looked back to Luna, who did not seem fazed by the comment.

“Direct drawing, yes.” She answered a bit sullenly. “Certainly not proud of that one.” She leaned back, arms crossed. “And the effects were devastating. I saw the roof was missing and the back wall was crumbling before you even tossed me into the Shadowfall a moment later.” The green-furred lady lupine clutched the edge of the table. They were talking about an incident that even history had not recorded that was one of the worst day for the Letai. The fall of that temple represented the waning of their empire.

“What is direct drawing?” Nita asked curiously. She wanted them not to talk about killing one another.

“It’s one of the biggest taboos we have.” Vhale replied. “We are only allowed to draw the essence that the lifestream has pulled away from an individual naturally, charged by the mood that person is in to attract it to us. But it is possible, for some of the most powerful Letai...” Vhale paused, seeming to feel he had no place to really explain what Luna had done.

“I can draw the essence from someone that the lifestream has not worn away. It can harm living things, even kill them outright. It’s barbaric and unforgivable. Near the end, some of our taboos were broken pretty recklessly in our desperation. That was a pretty clear indication of when we actually lost. It

should have killed Vhale because I would be attacking him with his own remaining lifespan. But..."

"But I knew her capable of such a thing, and I had a seal on a crystal I was carrying that prevented my energy from being drawn. All she did was reduce every living thing on the island, and for a half mile along the edge of the lake, to ashes." Luna was crestfallen at that.

"So yes, I am well aware of what it must look like by now." The priestess frowned at that.

"Or what it would look like if I did not choose to live there for the remaining few months that the dark one continued the illusion that my cause was my own." Vhale shrugged at the stunned-looking Luna.

"You ... repaired the temple?" she asked incredulously.

"Not to say seven centuries have not just pushed it flat again, but as I stated, I lost something when I took stock of what happened that day, and I was no longer useful to the dark one after that. That's how I ended up in the Shadowfall myself. The push, for me, would have stopped there. What few Letai remained would have likely hunted me down, and when they caught me, I imagine that would have been the end if it were not for the dark one finally revealing himself and finishing the job I made so much easier for him."

"If it's likely flat anyway, why would we believe you did this?" asked Nita, voicing her opinion. Regardless of how misguided the Letai male was, he was still responsible for giving power to and bringing about the existence of the demon that took away so much from her. She would hold him accountable no matter how much they had to cooperate with him or her future life mate wanted to prove the grace of the Letai to him.

"You don't have to, but what good would it do to lie about that?" he asked Nita, seeming simply passively curious.

"Do gain favor with the priestess." Nita barked in a scolding tone. She had seen how much he seemed to try to be nice to her.

"And this helps me how?" he asked. Nita fumed. Was he daring to mock her?

"It helps you because her favor would give you power and make life after all this is done perhaps more comfortable for you." Nita growled. "I'd have you drowned in vomit if Alps had not decided to show mercy, just so you know." She was only getting angrier at the feeling that Alps had been fooled by Vhale's sad

story of folly and regret. Her lover was pure and kind, and meant well, but he did not understand what kind of evil he was dealing with.

“Nita, that does not help anything.” Luna of course supported her son’s decision, however misguided it might have been.

“It’s alright, she is right to hold ill feelings, but Nita, Luna finds peace in not loathing me. Feel as you wish, but do not begrudge her this step of her recovery for what I have done.” Sometimes Nita forgot that the monster was a scholar before things went to pieces.

“We are *not* on such a familiar standing that you can call me by name, Mannus, and I am not angry that you might have her fooled, I am spitting fire furious that you are taking advantage of Alps’ kind heart. I will still make sure you pay if you are responsible for any harm that comes to him.” The queen growled.

“Me harm him? Are you kidding?” He seemed genuinely shocked at the notion. Nita gritted her teeth.

“Not to belittle his contributions here, but his loving nature makes him what Nidaja would call a soft target.” She gripped the edge of the table.

“Your majesty...” Vhale said in a deeper, more serious tone, “... Has it occurred to you at all that Luna’s son scares the very life out of me?”

“Vhale, don’t...” Luna whispered. He held up a hand.

“For all the taboos that Luna has broken, no one has been exposed to the kind of darkness that Aris has.” Nita’s blood went icy. “Alps remembers little of his journey into the places beyond his Shadowfall, and that is a fortunate thing because he will have known things there worse than those we intend to face, and he took them on as a child of maybe seven summers. The nether does not spare your life like the Shadowfall does, Nita. You can be killed. You can be eaten. You can be torn to pieces by merely being there, and he came back. As a child.” Nita had known that the place Alps went would have been hard, but she had scarcely considered what it might take for him to survive it. She had always thought perhaps he had hidden until he managed to slip out, maybe having some close calls, but he was a child. He didn’t have the ability to actually fight there.

“Vhale, we don’t know what actually happened to him in there.” Luna voiced Nita’s opinion clearly.

“But I know what was waiting for him there. I got to see it when the dark one separated itself from me, in some of that creature’s memories. So Nita, before you consider the best way to punish my treachery, which I promise you will never come, I would take some time to try to figure out what you intend to do

to Alps when he finally remembers what it took to survive there, and what it means to live not as the hero of the story, but as the most powerful monster of it instead.” Luna jumped up but was not able to prevent Vhale from being cast hard into the wall, Nita’s blast was not a fireball but just a powerfully aided punch to the chest. She had never, in her memorable life been more furious.

“You don’t get to call *anyone* monster, Mannus. Especially not him!” she barked, and walked out, slamming the door behind her. She passed Mytan in the hall, who seemed deeply concerned, but did not dare speak up. She went out onto the balcony, down the stairs and along the deck of the river boat to the aft section and down into the belly of the vessel. There, as she knew he would be, was her ‘monster’. He was tirelessly heaving coal into the fire. He did not immediately notice her watching him, which was good since she was able to stop crying. She composed herself. His love was the most genuine, pure thing that she knew. He could not possibly be any different, even if he did remember having to do terrible things in the nether. That was not his life. This was. Soon, he would be bound to her forever, and she knew him better than anyone, she felt. But deep inside she wondered if he could really tell her about every wound he suffered. She had been aware that Chana was unkind to him, but he never spoke of the level of abuse until Nidaja saw it in his memories. Could he tell her when he was really suffering if he thought it would harm her to know? Would Alps suffer alone just to protect her? In her heart, Nita knew that he would.

As the boat puffed along, a newly trained Lira at the helm, Alps toiled on, acting very much like the young slave that Nita fell in love with, and her heart made it clear that no matter what was in Alps’ memories or what wounds she had yet to discover, losing her would not be a wound that would ever be added.

Sirius, Book IV

A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 18

As the sun sank lower in the sky, Kaji and Neph returned from washing up. The others did not seem to know that there had been a bit of fun had between the fox, the captain, and the priestess-turned fox. Ceriss waited for everyone at their makeshift camp when Leal and the others had returned. They had been a bit surprised by her changed appearance, but her mannerisms caused Leal and Lunarix both to recognize her through her disguise easily enough, as she had not been trying to hide them. Leal sat quiet, munching still on more melon. He found them all over the place here and could not stop eating them. He had plenty of good food to compare it to back home, but it was unthinkable that it just grew everywhere, and it seemed to him that he was doing a favor to the plants by eating them and scattering the seeds everywhere. After what Ceriss had told him of the Lapine culture, he doubted they would mind if he ate a few of them, at least.

The location they had regrouped at after the others had washed up was a clearing at the base of a cliff, kind of wedged into a valley that seemed to suggest that the group was cornered. This was intended, however. There were thick broad-leafed plants that clung all along the cliff's edge, casting a greed pall to the valley below when the misty air was heavy in the evening. The sun was behind the mountains already, and the ocean breeze pulled the smell of salt air over them, pushing warmth into the valley to mix with the cold spilling down from the mountains. The loamy, rain-soaked field they stood in seemed a bit marshy, but it was clear of most obstacles. It was obvious that Ceriss intended a battle here.

Not wanting to alarm the other lapines who were not so well informed, Wahkeme came to the clearing himself. Leal had heard from Ceriss that he was not in the dark, but she did not really elaborate on what she meant by that. When he arrived and did not inspect a wolf beyond a glance, Leal understood though. He either knew all about wolves, or even knew about everything, including wolves. It put Leal at ease immediately to see that he did not recoil from any of the group, despite being old and frail. Still, that was probably an earned level of bravery, so the guard did nothing to try to seem intimidating. It was the lapine's world they were stuck in for the moment.

"Your friends are loyal, I fear no betrayal of them. This is good." Wahkeme stated coldly. "It is almost dusk. You seem to know already what you face, then you must know what you need to bring it here." The lupine guard widened his eyes, gazing back and forth between the beautiful white female Lhap and the grizzled old rabbit. He got

right to the point. This actually encouraged Leal a little. There was not a lot of fear from the rabbit, it meant that he felt confident that the group could handle it. That lightened his heart a little. Ceriss spoke coldly.

"It may still not be enough to do what you asked. The Letai avoided these things for a reason. Our connection to the essence makes us epically appealing targets." She crossed her arms. Leal looked back and forth between her and the old rabbit. Well, that sucked all the comfort right out of him. Ceriss told them that they would have to do something difficult for the lapine village, but he was not told that she was that fearful that it would not work. He stood up, wanting to interject something, but not knowing what to say. His normal hope to instill confidence was not there because he did not know enough. So he asked.

"I have still not been told exactly what we are supposed to stomp out here." He was willing to do anything the priestess needed, but he was a little alarmed that no one liked even discussing what this was. He liked moving forward knowing what was there and not just plunging into the unknown. Careful balance of bravery and wisdom had kept him alive this long at least. Ceriss glanced at the guard who had developed a deep and meaningful fondness for her.

"Well, now's a good time to tell you, Leal. We are going to be making an attempt in the offing of a Culier Shadow tonight." There was a pause. It seemed to mean little to Neit, but Kaji, Neph, and Leal all tensed up heavily. It was like being told that there was a fire coming that would consume them all and there was no way to get out of it.

"Those don't die." Leal's response got Neit's attention.

"Wait, what?" she asked, pulling her pack a little tighter. Ceriss spoke up.

"Not from something as basic as a sword attack, no, but Letai have other ways to fight. I stand a chance, but I need the rest of you to keep it away from me long enough to work my energy around it. I cannot be touched by it, or it just gets another corpse to feed upon. The rest of you will follow because it will be kind of pissed about the hacking and hewing of its parts." Leal inhaled deeply. This was a nightmare scenario. There were no adventure stories that ended happily with, 'And then the heroes faced a Culier Shadow'. Only horror stories ended like that.

"Is this really a necessary course of action?" Leal asked, plaintively gesturing to Ceriss, ignoring the fact that the old rabbit was still standing there. He did not seem fazed by it. It was probably expected that not everyone would like the idea that they had this kind of challenge. Ceriss shook her head.

"I get the impression that the best way to get the Lapine population here to assist us is to prove that we'd assist them when given the chance." She also seemed to ignore the codger. He did not seem to mind that either, and, eyes closed, was smiling blissfully. Leal looked at him carefully. Did he enjoy the terror some of the party who

knew what they would be facing felt? He didn't seem the type. He seemed oddly at peace, as if it did not matter so much to him how this was to end. Since it concerned his own people, it was odd to Leal that he relaxed as much as he did. His flopped grey ears rested upon his brow as he leaned on his cane. The captain took his turn to speak.

"Well, I feel a peck more confident since we have a priestess with us, sure, but this still be a fool's errand. Then again, coming across th' sea was as well." Kaji pulled his belt a little tighter, as if getting ready to scrap. "How do we go about findin' it?" he asked. Ceriss looked toward the darkening sky, seeming not to want to discuss that immediately, as if searching for another way.

"This is the part that none of you are going to be thanking me for." She spoke softly, with an air of regret. "I am very sorry to put everyone through this." Leal was immediately fearful. That tone of regret he had heard before.

"Well, it comes immediately if someone dies," The rabbit offered. "... And I've lived a long life, so one of you can take the honor, and my sacrifice will save the valley. I have no regrets." The bent, old creature nodded to Neit, as if she would be the most likely to be able to strike him down. She balked.

"Absolutely not!" the former thief barked. "I'm no murderer!"

"Splendid." The rabbit announced. "Only a burglar then." Neit looked accusingly at Ceriss as if she was the one who told him. The priestess lightly shrugged. Wakheme continued. "Not so bad, really. But the offer does stand. None of our villagers particularly feels like dying tonight, and I am not sure how else to attract the thing." He leaned back against a palm tree, arms crossed over the top of his cane. Leal suddenly understood exactly why Wakheme was being serene and calm in the face of this danger. He was not intending to face it. He was intending to sleep the final sleep. Ceriss answered, her voice raised with a tone of finality.

"And our refusal still stands, Wakheme. The Letai do not murder. Even for this. Fortunately, I think I have another way. Death is not the only thing that will attract those. My way is not much better, but it does not involve actually killing someone to an end that might not promise victory." The priestess took two large steps back, her thick tail swaying. Leal watched her as she posed a figure of extreme vulpine beauty. Did the rabbit know what she really was? Could he see it? He did seem wise, and she seemed to think there was nothing worth hiding from him.

"Do you seriously know another way?" he asked curiously, seeming as if he was not exactly celebrating his sudden survival where he had assumed that he would be ending his life right there. Perhaps he was having trouble believing it.

"There is another way, but you won't enjoy that I do this. Nor will Leal. Enjoying it least of all, however, will be Lunar." She stated, looking at the grey lupine with a

heavy heart, then to the guard's commander, who looked up with more than a fraction of genuine concern.

"If it involves not killing this nice old rabbit, I think I can forgive you." Leal offered honestly. He did not want Ceriss carrying around more weight when it was obvious that she was trying to help in the best way possible. She did not want blood on her hands unnecessarily, and there was a time where he was sure that the means to an end would have meant that she would have been fine with snuffing the rabbit who was old and had offered to go. This, to the guard, was an improvement.

"I will have to attract it by using a forbidden essence technique." She approached Lunariss. "And I am a little limited in just who I can use it on." She stared him down pretty sharply.

"This is going to hurt, isn't it?" he asked.

"Oh my goodness, yes." Ceriss answered.

"I'm all in." Neit said jovially.

"You won't be for long." The priestess stated. She took the large fang from Kaji's belt, making him jump. He backed up a bit. It was not him who Ceriss had targeted though. Leal's commander gazed at the priestess coldly. As she approached, worry flickered over his features. She was serious.

"Wait, what are you doing..?" Lunariss asked.

"I have been drawing essence heavily from Leal and Neit and Neph, and just earlier from Kaji. This has to be someone who has strong essence still." She looked at the tall black lupine apologetically. "There is too small a margin of error for this on the others. They will be far less likely to survive this."

"I am starting to feel like maybe the rabbit is at a ripe enough age." Lunariss backed up a little.

"Calm down, you waif, it will hurt, but it won't hurt for long." Ceriss continued to approach. "I can no longer handle the exact kind of pure energy Luna can, I've done too much on the other side of the spectrum. If I am to gain a lot of power at one time, enough to do this very difficult thing, there's only one way left for me to do it."

"This is one of the most interesting things I have ever seen." Wahkeme stated softly. It was as if he were not even a part of what was going on.

"No one asked you." Leal answered, not liking the thought of Ceriss hurting his commanding officer like this, but he suspected there was not a better or more reliable way. The rabbit spoke up in his defense.

"I am not so crass as not to appreciate the meaning of all of this. The Letai are an unknown to our people, though stories of those who mastered the use of the essence exist, folks from across the sea. Bad omens there, so you might not want to advertise that about yourself." Wahkeme said warningly. Leal had no intention so that wasn't a big deal. While his attention was otherwise directed at Wahkeme, however, he heard a sharp cry from Lunariss, who, as he turned suddenly, was holding his shoulder. Ceriss handed the fang back to Kaji, who held it sickly between two fingers. The tip was crimson. Had the priestess actually stabbed him? It certainly appeared that way. Lunariss seemed angry about that. Kaji offered the fang to Neph, who took it and balked.

"No, I'm good, you can have it." But he did not immediately put the trophy down, he moved it over to some leaves and laid it there, perhaps intending to clean it later. Like his captain, he felt it might have value.

"Ceriss, can't we just get another rabbit? Someone who will be fine to endure this?" There was no stopping Ceriss though. She did not make this kind of decision easily, it seemed. Especially not after the conversation that she had with her deeply favored lupine guard. She shook her head slowly.

"That won't do and you know it, Lunariss." Her voice was sorrowful and soft. She wanted to make sure he knew that she did not catch some strange pleasure in all of this. "Most importantly, you are related by blood to the Royal house, which is related by blood to the Letai highland line. I have no way to know if a single lapine will have the essence that you do. Also, the rabbits need someone to help them, but it will darken our feat if any of them come to harm at our hands. Wahkeme was testing us though I doubt he would admit it."

"I admit it freely." The codger lapine stated.

"I don't like you." Neph stated flatly.

"I wasn't being hostile." Wahkeme rumbled.

"Enough." Ceriss growled. "Lunariss, the really painful part is done, but what comes next will be far more unpleasant in a different way. Sit down."

"Well, when you offer it like that..." Lunariss looked even angrier at the priestess. He did not like being 'abused' as it were, and that was what was going on here as far as he was concerned.

"I will heal it and be quite nice about it later, I assure you." Ceriss stated. "I stuck you in a place that won't inhibit your fighting. Just a scratch, I assure you."

"I know that, I'm perfectly fine, but I would like to at least know what..." The priestess backed him against a tree and cupped her mouth against the wound. There was no warning and no time to react.

"No..." Wahkeme backed away slowly. Leal glanced over to him. The inside of his limp ears had gone ashen. He was horrified more than anything that Leal could understand. He looked back at Ceriss. Lunar is was pushed against the tree tightly, shaking, which Leal did not expect from him, his eyes wide as the sound of Ceriss' throat contracting was very easily audible. She was drinking from the wound.

"Ew. Oh Ceriss... No..." Neit backed away just a bit squeamish.

"I have no idea what's going on." Neph whispered to Neit. The former thief looked ill.

"Oh by the heavens, this is dark enough, I assure you." Wahkeme said in a somewhat flat and dead tone. He was still backing away, and then, somewhat inexplicably, he was just gone, he bolted from the scene so fast it was hard for Leal to believe that he was even an old rabbit. He was simply missing that single moment later.

"I feel like shit." Lunar is said in a wavering tone. He seemed shocked at whatever Ceriss was doing to him. Her eyes slowly opened, and were glowing bright red. Leal backed away a little too. This was a very dark thing, even he could feel it, the energy emanating off of her. It felt like death. He could describe it no other way.

"What?" Neit stated. Lunar is sank down slowly against the tree.

"I feel like I'm dying. Oh Neit, I-" He closed his eyes, words failing at the end before sliding fully and silently down the tree. Ceriss went with him, mouth still upon that wound.

"Ceriss, what are you..." Leal asked.

"She's drawin' from the source." Kaji stated, his voice wavering as well. "Letai... ain't allowed to do that. It's bad. It's real bad."

"Drawing from the source?" asked Neit.

"She's takin' his essence he en't naturally parted with." Kaji explained. "There's stories about Letai what went bad and did that. Bad stories. It's a high crime. Letai don't..." He cupped his muzzle. Leal looked back to Ceriss. Gone was the pretty white fennec, and back was the dark, frightening, shadowy Ceriss, her eyes glowing red, not violet. Kaji backed up a little more as well, obviously fearful. Neph, seeing his captain backing up, did the same, as if there was about to be an explosion. Leal however did not back away. What she did, even if horrifying, she did for the reasons that she had explained before. Survival. Leal felt it was up to him to make sure she knew she had

arms to fall into when these ill moments were over. That was the love he had openly offered to her.

"I still forgive you." The guard explained to Ceriss, knowing that she did not like doing what she was doing, but thankful that they did not actually have to kill someone to do the thing they needed to do. He was still more or less unaware of what they were supposed to be doing, or what they would specifically be facing. Ceriss had stated they would distract it while she got ready to attack it. Was there a reason she left the plan open outside of that? Was it that volatile a situation that planning was a hindrance? He had heard the name uttered in taverns and such, but he was not really very well aware of what a Culier Shadow was. Only that it was about as bad a thing as one could have to fight.

Ceriss did not really respond to Leal. She finally let go of Lunariss, and left him half-lying, slumped on the ground. He looked pretty dead to Leal. He drew closer to Lunariss, but then noticed that he could still see his commander's essence. It took a lot of focus to do it, however. Something less focused and more used to finding dead things would easily mistake him as deceased. Leal backed up a little more as Ceriss moved closer.

"You will attack when this thing shows..." her voice sounded strange, as if heard through a layer of rippling water. "Do not touch with your body, just hack at anything that looks like your sword can sever it. That will get its attention. These things are not very fast when they appear fully in our world to feed." It was then that Leal realized how much Ceriss actually knew of what she was doing. Wahnkeme was right about her, eerily so. Was there anyone alive who knew what to do as well as she did? For all of their sakes, he hoped not. He paid close attention to her as she explained the very simple requirements for their survival.

"I will do my best. What do the others do?" he asked. What could Neit do? What could Neph do? They were not fighters. Kaji, he felt, could hold his own.

"Not much time." Ceriss warned. "Kaji will stay and help you in case it directs entirely upon you to make it turn again. It will come for Lunariss, then for me. Don't let it have either. Neph, Neit, take Lunariss the moment it arrives and head toward the stream. Get over the stream; it will have trouble sensing his death more than my anger when you get him across." There was a sudden look of actual panic on Neit's face.

"His *death*?!" she cried, looking at the limp captain of the guard, his eyes looking up blankly at the darkening sky as the sun was beginning to set. Leal felt a pang of guilt. Neit cared about Lunariss even though he antagonized her so, and she had no reason to understand that he was alive. He didn't even seem to be breathing. The guard opened his mouth to tell the thief his commander still lived.

"Time's up." Ceriss barked. There was a heavy feeling in the clearing. Leal felt physically sick, and very nearly vomited. The others did not seem affected as badly.

"It's here." Kaji stated. There was a distortion in the middle of the clearing. It looked like there was something there, but it was just not possible to really focus on it, like there was a spot in Leal's vision, and then, there was a black, hulking shape, like a pile of grass and limbs and other clippings, but it was as black as anything could be, even more than the shadowy, no-light-reflecting Ceriss. It was as if it glowed with blackness. It was also immediately very large, casting bewilderment on how one could not see such a thing come into being so suddenly like that. It was two heads taller than Leal, and about twelve feet across. A dark, horrifying beast with no head whose mere touch rendered the living lifeless. Even the Letai left stories in the oldest texts of just abandoning towns if these showed up close by. How long had the rabbits been dealing with it to not even have a graveyard, since it always came for their dead? How many perished just removing someone who suddenly died from the village?

There was a soft throb and air pushed back as it seemed that it finally came completely into the clearing. Leal's ears popped from its sudden appearance.

"Alright, move Lunaris." Ceriss said in a soft tone. Neit whimpered and pulled at the heavy wolf. He seemed dead, and Leal made a mental note that Ceriss had been right. She seemed to not enjoy that fact at all. As much as she might have teased before that she didn't care, this was bad for her. She did not have the ability to see his essence. She did not know he was alive. Neph was a bit more helpful in getting Lunaris up. He was deceptively strong. It took a lot to keep a ship going with just two crew. Leal looked back at the beast. It was turning toward Ceriss, and then toward Kaji who did not waste a moment of time hewing off what looked like a stick. That part of it squirmed around like a slug on salt as it hissed on the grass. Leal advanced.

Things were happening so fast. Ceriss was not one to waste much time with discussion when something was decided, and she had perhaps already decided that this was how they were going to summon the thing but it made sense at least to Leal why she did not opt to tell everyone else the plan. Several would likely have refused it. This was something that needed to be done, not discussed. What Ceriss had told him about how things went earlier on the war with the dark one allowed it to make even more sense to not to allow for committee vote. That sluggishness had perhaps cost the Letai their very existence.

"Keep it back; work it toward the cliff if you can, farther away from me! Make it back up, even if it means putting yourself behind it and attacking!" Ceriss called her orders very specifically. She then began moving her hands side to side in a flowing dance-like motion, her hips following suit. Leal was pretty confused by this, but decided it had to be some kind of ritual.

"Don't let it touch you!" Kaji called, snapping Leal's attention back fully. A tendril had sprouted from it and it reached for Leal. The grey lupine gasped in horror, having not realized that it could change shape and sprout parts like that. He swiffed his blade neatly to the side and off came the tendril. He backed away hastily as if it could run in

full pursuit, and then moved in a circle. He was surprised to find it was not a very fast creature, but it was not very slow either. One had to keep moving in the fight or they might well be overtaken. Certainly it had no trouble scooping up a corpse, and would likely have followed these rabbits to the end of the valley for its quarry.

“Lunaris is safely away.” Ceriss barked. “When I tell you both to, you have to get *behind* me. You do not want to be any part of this.” She was still gesturing. Leal focused so he could see essence a little more clearly. There was a red ball of essence, so dark it almost looked like blood in her hands, rolling around like a glass ball, almost hypnotically. Was this another darker essence ability? Was it what she used the essence that she had removed in such forbidden fashion from Lunaris for? Kaji cried out, almost overtaken, and Leal took off two tendrils with a single swipe. The thing suddenly wheeled around, as if Ceriss had just done something to it. She was extremely focused and did not call out to anyone. Leal hacked at its retreating form, careful that it didn’t just stop suddenly and cause him to barrel right into it. Kaji was a bit more distant, but was advancing as well. This fight was rattling him and Leal could tell that he did not spend much time fighting.

“Help me with this, Kaji, it’s not backing down!” he cried. It was getting close to Ceriss and he could not get it to focus back on him. Kaji hacked at it a few times, fearing, as Leal did, running right into it and ... suffering whatever fate *that* meant, which was unclear, but it was not working. The creature advanced uncaring. It seemed to know already that Ceriss was the real threat. Swords could not truly stop it, but what she was doing was deadly.

The priestess was moving faster, a look of fear in her eyes. She would not be ready in time. She had not told them to get behind her yet. Leal spun himself, hitting it a half dozen times in a second, dark mass flying everywhere, Kaji having to dodge pieces of it and hopelessly dropping back because of being unsure which parts flying off of it were still attached. Still, it would not stop. Leal hurled his sword into the center of it, sinking it in to the handle, so much that he dare not try to retrieve it and still it wanted Ceriss more. Did it simply stop feeling pain?

“Ceriss, move!” Kaji barked. She moved, but only her hands, trying to finish her technique. She certainly knew how to perform under pressure, but her expression was one of abject horror. There was clear desperation in her eyes.

“*No!*” Leal screamed, hands out. He wanted to use his own essence to bait it to him. His ears folded back tightly and he held up his hands, willing himself, with what little he knew of the essence that Ceriss had taught him, and he felt a sharp pain in his palms. He shook his hands, a little stunned by that jolt of unbidden agony, and there was a bright flash in time with the shake, like flicking water from wet fingertips. He flinched from it, thinking at first that Ceriss had performed her technique in panic with everyone still behind the shadow. As his eyes focused again, the damage to it, a red, ember-lined, blood-like glowing crater, was on Leal’s side, not Ceriss’. The dark beast

stopped. It did not seem to care about Ceriss for that moment, slowly turning toward the one who in all appearances damaged it.

“What in th’ darkest fires was that?!” Kaji barked.

“Uh, back up.” Leal stated.

“Oh crap.” Kaji stated, beginning to move.

“Get behind me!” Ceriss barked.

“Absolutely!” Kaji shouted, bolting around the injured creature. Leal was stunned, but followed directions as best he could. His hands hurt as if he had just held his sword with both hands and swung as hard as he could into the side of a cliff. It was a kind of stinging he hoped would only last that long. The moment he and Kaji were past Ceriss’ shoulders, she cried out,

“Staros’lin stahurarthutir’eldaren!” There was a flash of red light, and the Culier Shadow made a horrifying roar like a storm in a bottle held up to one’s ear. Kaji and Leal both fell to the ground, holding their ears and crying out and the dark mass expanded outward violently, overtaking them. Leal feared immediately it killed everyone, but he only felt intense heat from the explosion, a wave of fire emitted out like a sphere but it was brief enough that it didn’t burn so much as it just charred their fur in places. A few dryer patches of vegetation lit on fire, casting an orange glow on the clearing.

Leal’s ears were ringing, he could hardly hear, and he suspected the others were likewise affected. He looked over at Ceriss, who sat down, holding her head, looking like she might get sick, and Kaji just lay on his side, blinking, rubbing his ears. A few moments passed and the guard was thankful that his hearing began to return. The still dark-furred priestess panted softly, audibly Leal was happy to note. Neph and Neit returned, Lunaris walking in between them with some assistance. His shoulder was still bloody, and he looked like he was suffering from a horrible illness.

“You are up faster than I expected you would be.” Ceriss stated calmly. Leal was still in some level of shock from what happened. Ceriss hit that horrible legendary monster so hard it exploded. Was it really and truly gone? Was the technique she used that intense? How long had it been since one of those creatures had fallen?

“I cannot believe you did that. You could have warned me about that shit hours ago.” He seemed very cross. “You drank my blood, you spook. That’s as far on the scale of things I didn’t want to know about the Letai as it can go.”

“You’d never have allowed me to do it.” Ceriss drank some water from her flask as if they just got done with some friendly sparring and everyone did not just almost die. Leal assumed it was to get rid of the taste as she had not wanted to do that in the first

place. "You'd have gone on about how you were one of the most skilled fighters and could not be laying there paralyzed and pissing yourself while everyone else was fighting." Neit looked down and then let Lunaris go, taking a big step to the right.

"The old vision-tales were true. You really stopped it. You stopped it in an instant." The rabbit approached far more slowly than he had departed. Ceriss narrowed her eyes, glowing violet again, at the rabbit. Leal wondered if he had actually watched that from afar.

"Funny thing about visions like that, Wahkeme..." the priestess stood up, and then held one of his ears, making him freeze in place. "They have a way of singling out someone who seems strong to match the legend and that person is just forced to come up with a way to prevail where all others are too cowardly to try." Leal gritted his teeth. She seemed as if she was about to strike down the codger. He did not seem afraid though.

"Most of them are too fearful, you are right, but tell me Ceriss." He approached her to prove his own resolve, surprising for Leal since even he would not just walk right to Ceriss if she was mad at him right at that moment. "Do you really think any in my village could have burned four generations of our dead back into the lifestream?" His eyes were narrow, sly, and very wise. Neph stammered softly,

"What? That thing was ..."

"At least 150 dead rabbits." Ceriss answered flatly. "Caught up in a ball of hateful energy, a single spirit accumulating more and more and hungering always for yet more. That is what a Culier shadow is." Wahkeme spoke up,

"We prefer to be called Caefahnians, honestly." The dark priestess flickered in her form again, and seemed to kneel down a little, but then it was evident that she was not stooping, but actually changing size. She went back to being a small, sweet-looking Lhap. Leal blushed a little seeing her like this. When he saw it the first time, he thought that it had been Neph that she was drawing from, he was surprised she used it on Kaji, but he found that he liked this form for her quite a bit. She stroked the old rabbit's ears, and he parted his mouth just a little, his body tensing, proving that he was not immune to the touch of a beautiful girl, particularly one as powerful as Ceriss was.

"I will call you that then, but if you recall, there was an opposite side to our deal. You will assist us in leaving? In going home? Surely there is really a strange person who lives not too far away that has a way, as you stated?" There was such an undertone of absolute danger in the sweet, soothing voice that Ceriss used. It was almost more frightening than seeing her fight. The rabbit actually softened in his demeanor.

"Oh, there is, I will keep our part of the bargain, and furthermore, I offer our village to you for the night. Good food, a comfortable place to bed down, and our

hospitality for as long as you care to enjoy it. Your friend there looks like he might need to rest a little. All of you seem a little tattered, truth be told. I imagine the trip over the sea, while forgotten in the face of that fight, still aches in your bones?" He looked even at the young Neit, who nodded slowly. She seemed to like the idea of getting to rest a little after all she had been through. Leal noticed, also, that she clung close to Lunariss. Perhaps a little extra sliver of good had come of Ceriss' very dark act upon him. Life had been hard for her, he knew, and the culmination was a fight for her life that she perhaps had never considered the real ramifications of. Those she travelled with were her companions and she did not want to lose any of them. Even crass Lunariss.

"We will accept this. We could definitely use some time to recover. Will this cause too much disruption in your village?" she asked. Leal was warmed a bit by the fact that this even mattered to her.

"I think it would sadden them more if you refused to accept the invitation." Wahkeme stated.

"I am liking this plan more than the one we just went through." Lunariss said with a glare to Ceriss. Leal frowned at that. He hoped that he would be able to forgive the priestess. He knew it was hard, but he believed that Lunariss would have reacted just as she said he would. Still, that probably did feel like a serious violation to him. The former ship captain spoke up immediately.

"You'll get over it. It's nothing being loved by everyone around you for a while won't cure." Kaji said, breaking the tension and slapping Lunariss on the back. He shuddered and looked to Kaji, then softened his expression and laughed softly.

"Food is in order at least." The guard captain sighed and hobbled along with the others, Neit tucked helpfully and warmly under his injured shoulder. It had stopped bleeding on its own. As Ceriss had stated, it was not a bad wound. Leal smiled a bit at Kaji. For however awkward he might have been in battle, the older lupine had a way of lightening the mood when that was needed. That was a valuable skill in a tough spot too. Many missions failed because those who took it on fell apart before they could succeed. At least now the group had a chance to find someone who might be able to get them home, though he had no idea how. They began to trundle toward the village.

The boat listed ever so gently. The river was always calm and it did not push the ship the way the ocean did vessels that Luna had become more accustomed to. It felt sometimes like they had stopped moving up the river, and often she had to glance out of a porthole to make sure they were still on their way. It had been a few days of travel and they were already certainly outpacing any news of their journey. There would be

news of it she was sure. There was so little for her to do on the boat, however. She found herself getting to know Lyat better. She spent quite a lot of time just resting with him when it was her son's turn to shovel coal. Alps had insisted that he be allowed to do it, and at first the priestess did not understand, but after a day or so it became evident he was doing it to keep others from feeling that his position as the soon-to-be mate of the queen did not afford him special treatment. They were in this fight together, and that, to Alps, really meant together. In the time that she rested with Lyat, she found out that he had originally been chosen as a potential mate for the empress but that there was a fear that the dark one would target him to make the empress suffer, so he was kept close, but not close enough. Ultimately, they had to take such measures to hide their closeness that it became impossible to be together. This, it seemed, had been the start of her desperate search for a true end to the war. This made Luna like Lyat far more. His love for his empress and lover was strong enough to rewrite history.

It was thoughts of this which were interrupted by the soft click of her chamber door. Vhale was the one who entered. He smelled sweet, immediately evident as he entered the room, dressed in black and silver robes. He'd been munching on fruit perhaps. It was rather late so Luna was surprised to have a visitor.

"I was hoping you'd still be awake." The dark-furred lupine stated in a soft, gentle tone. Luna nodded to him.

"Something is on your mind? Troubling even to you?" she asked with some concern.

"Actually, less troubles me now and it is for that I come to you." He looked into her eyes.

"You want more trouble? I suspect Nita would be happier to provide that." Luna chuckled to ensure that her former foe understood she was not serious.

"You defended my convictions and my point of view even if it cast ill light upon your own flesh and blood. I wanted to apologize for saying those things, Luna." He looked down at his feet. "I have my fears, but it's not right for me to burden others with them. Things are hard enough..."

"Vhale, sit here..." The priestess patted the short plush couch she was sitting on. He approached and sat, hands on his knees, looking straight forward, seeming riddled with regret. He had not been kind in his wording of his fears about Alps.

"It's alright for her to be mad at me. I am quick with my tongue. I didn't have to deal with keeping people around me happy." He lowered his head a little. Luna gritted her teeth. She had not taken even a second to consider what life was like for Vhale during the war. He was surrounded by artificial soldiers created to wage his war, and never did he have at his side real companions. It made perfect sense that real, live companions would be new and difficult for him.

“She can be mad at you, but Alps thinks you are something different than what you were. I hope that he is right, I really do, and that I think is good for you. I do not know what you really are, what you had been, what you could have been, but if I can hope that you are something better, well, that’s not a bad start for you.” Luna placed a hand on Vhale’s robed shoulder. He felt hard as a rock, muscles tight with anxious worry.

“I think a lot about the first time I met you face to face Luna. It makes my heart ache to know what I took away from you. From everyone, but I know that I won’t be able to make anything right, make anything better if I just sit and do nothing. So I go with you, but make no mistake, my primary loyalty, my very life, is for Aris. I want you to understand that even with my fears; I live and die for him now. He illuminates the one path that will mend these broken lands. What happens to me then, I care not. I promise you; I swear to you, I will not betray him or you.” Luna was a bit stunned to hear this from him.

“I accept your promise, Vhale. I hold you to it forever.” She slipped her arms around him. There was a hard shudder. He leaned forward, shaking. She blinked quietly. Was he ill? She then felt wetness against her bosom. Her heart jumped inside her. She pulled him tighter to herself. This cold, aloof, seemingly unbreakable warlord could not fall apart in her arms. That was unthinkable. A choked sound, and then a dull, muffled sob as his arms slipped behind her and held her as well. Luna swallowed loudly, finding her own eyes wet. She lowered her head, and clutched Vhale tighter. He completely broke down.

What she had expected to feel in such a circumstance was a dark boiling essence of sorrow and regret, all the pain he’d felt and had no one to tell it to, but what came from him surprised Luna. The familiar tug of joyful essence kindled her desires to draw, and she could not help but pull it slowly to herself. Vhale felt deep contentment in her arms, enough that she could draw an appreciable amount of essence from him. The priestess stroked the former villain, even as he slowed in his somewhat embarrassing sobbing, he clutched her tight, mostly pressing his cheek to her shoulder, seeming to find incalculable joy in just having someone to hold, and moreover, someone who would hold him too.

What happened next Luna could not really control and certainly would not be able to explain. She pulled Vhale’s chin up, eyes closing, she tilted her head, and pushed her mouth over his. Every muscle in his body tightened and his hands clutched at the back of her robes as her tongue pushed into his sweet-tasting mouth. He went somewhat limp at that, before stroking his hand down her hair, from behind her ears and down her back in slow, tender caresses. Luna’s heart hammered hard and fast. What in the entire history of the Letai was she trying to do? Forgiving was one thing, but was she just overwhelmed by the power of his essence of joy? Luna pushed Vhale back, hand on his chest, pulling at his robes with a sense of want as her mouth matched perfectly to his own, her body suddenly blazing with need.

Vhale leaned back a little more, his neck bared to her, as the priestess kissed it, his choked final sob sifting to an anxious, needy sigh. This, Luna thought, was not what he came for. Was he taking advantage of her, or was she taking advantage of him? She bit softly at his neck, then a little tighter, a lot of lust behind it before lifting her head, thinking a moment on the bite she had given. Panting, Vhale did not seem to mind, but Luna suddenly understood why every cell in her body was on fire. She was healing Vhale. Her need for healing was kindled so heavily by his breakdown in her arms that she did what she almost invariably did in such a case, and lost control.

"I... I am sorry to be so... aggressive about this... I cannot help it." Luna whispered, pushing tightly against Vhale. The past foe gazed up dreamily into the priestess' eyes. He shook his head slowly.

"I should certainly not be encouraging it. It would cause unneeded distraction for the others, I fear." He whispered, but groaning slightly as his hips pushed against Luna's thigh, letting her feel just how much of an effect her kiss had caused. A chill went up her spine. In that moment, she felt that it would not hurt just to let him know what it was like to feel release in the arms of another. She reached slowly down his front, drawing his robes open.

"It's alright, Vhale. It really is no one else's concern but ours." Luna bit his shoulder again softly, making him tense up and arch against her again. He felt so warm. Luna could not believe she was even considering allowing this to happen.

"We don't have to... if you have even a single reservation... but..." He writhed against the only slightly older priestess.

"But you would not dream of denying this much more, Vhale..." Luna's whisper was all but inaudible. "Have you ever?" she asked. She knew what the answer had to be. He did not allow himself such diversion, not early on when his studies were all that mattered. He gasped slightly as Luna's gentle and loving hand pushed down his robes and curled around his thick, already wet member. He answered in a shuddering breath.

"No, I haven't before toni-"

Click.

The door swung open. Luna leaned back so suddenly she nearly knocked Vhale off the couch. Vhale clutched her robes, holding on so he didn't fall, and as Lyat entered, he looked up with a measure of surprise, and then narrowed his eyes at Vhale. Luna gritted her teeth.

"No, no! It's fine Lyat, he's not hurting me." She shook her head rapidly to indicate even that he didn't need to be there at all. Lyat stood firm, but Vhale got up, not

facing Lyat for his own modesty, which was lost on Luna completely. She blushed at that, but cupped her muzzle. Whale inched toward the door.

“That is enough practice for tonight, Luna. Thank you, I shall take my leave so that Lyat can attend to whatever business he has. I really appreciate it. Really. I am very grateful...” He shuffled sideways to the door, then around Lyat, and out onto the deck and presumably toward his room. Luna inhaled deeply, suddenly very alarmed at what nearly happened. Was it good that Lyat showed up? Was it bad?

“Is everything being alright, Priestess Luna?” asked Lyat very formally.

“It is.” Luna leaned back on the couch, aching with desire. Her eyes fixed on the hyena. He inched toward the door.

“Lyat was hoping to be helpful in preparations for queen’s wedding. I will inquire about Letai life-mate tradition thing later.” He backed away slowly. Luna widened her eyes, suddenly very much against him leaving. She could use a strong hyena right that moment. With the pulling and pushing and grabbing and biting. That would be perfect. But the door clicked.

“Faaaaaahhkhk!” Luna growled, flopping back on the couch and sighing heavily. She moved a hand to her chest, and then, frustrated, pulled open the top of her robes and just pulled her pink nipple to her lips, nipping with a whine. “What d’ hew if wrong wif meh?” she growled around the stinging little nub, and then she cupped her mouth over the flesh and suckled softly, before huffing through her nose, still getting a slight trickle of milk. It took a long time, left to nature, for that to stop for a mother Letai, and Luna’s motherhood had been interrupted, cancelled even by the very one she was about to give her body to completely. The thought somewhat infuriated her.

It was his fault that she did not get to be a mother. How could she want to do something like that to him? What justice would that serve? Luna then tensed and groaned around her captured nipple, and popped her muzzle free, a thought, fleeting and silly, running through her head. With that thought, the mere consideration of what she was about to do seemed almost harmonic with the essence, and her body trembled. It was as depraved a thought as she’d ever allowed herself, and it only incensed her more. She tucked her fingers under the heavy hem of her green-hued robes. Her sex was puffy and almost sloppy with arousal, and she spread her folds around her pushing, swirling digits. It occurred to Luna as she did this that she had not once had to pleasure herself after leaving the Shadowfall. She bit her lip and laid back a bit heavily, pushing one foot up on the leg of the couch as she pushed three fingers in to the knuckles.

She used her thumb to pinch her stiffening clit against the surface of her fingers as they probed deeply, the priestess panting out hotly, breathlessly as fleeting images of things she had nearly done danced through her mind. Whale, so dangerous and dark, so hated and despised, pinned to the couch, the priestess biting and pushing and being as much a hyena as Lyat utterly failed to be a moment ago. He belonged to the Letai

now. Vhale had no destiny of his own, only what was chosen for him, that was what he had chosen, and he would give himself willingly, would he not? What would she take? Oh, Luna trembled, shook like a little leaf as her fingers pistoned noisily into her clutching, tight, steamy channel when she considered what she would take, her feet both coming up off of the floor and the couch arm. They bounced with a little shock of pleasure with each loud splat of her knuckles hitting her clit, her whine welling up. Oh what Luna would take, as he arched hard, told her please to be more cautious, more careful, and then surrender, sweet, sweet surrender as he yielded to her demand, the justice destiny provided.

Luna arched and then pulled her knees to her shoulder, fingers flittering back and forth rapidly as she bucked hard, trying not to cry out as she recalled every memory of that heat bathing her inner flesh, that gift of essence, the very thing that Vhale threatened to take away forever, all of his essence would be hers to use to heal, to seal, to push back the darkness. His hot waves of seed welling inside her; that was what she would take from him and her entire body shook violently as it ignited a wildfire climax that spread through her like lightning. What better use could there be for the former enemy than to use his own life essence to turn back the darkness at last? Luna, in her fit of pleasure, did not consider it merely excusing her rather dangerously selfish desires, she just took the time to enjoy her darkest, most taboo fantasy. For a priestess trained in the art of pleasure as she was, very little held a dangerous taboo, but this... Oh how could she think of anything else but this?

She slid slowly down off the couch, onto the floor, her skirt bringing back her modesty, her robes slowly pulled shut as she panted heavily, and absentmindedly licked clean her soaked fingers, She looked at the door, shamefully pondering notions that she knew full well she ought not, and then slumped back against the couch, still planted on the floor, and dozed off right where she was, locked in a daydream of selfish ridiculousness that she knew she did not dare partake of or even discuss. It would be seen as madness, but it was her sweet, dark madness to enjoy.

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 19

The sight before Alps was one of pristine beauty. He had traveled many times around the towns where he lived with Chana, and even around Seravi, where he had been in an orphanage. In all that time, he'd never seen something as perfect and untouched as this place seemed to be. After a few weeks of relatively comfortable, and thankfully uneventful travel via a boat that they thought would break down at any moment and leave them on foot, they had arrived at the mouth of Lake Frostpelt. To the north, and a bit to the west, Alps could see from where he was standing at wheel of the boat the small point of land that rose from the water in the distance. His heart quickened. He could not help it. He was born there. His mother had lived there with him, and he was going back. He would see the Letai Temple of Life for the first time in his memory, but his own life had actually started there. What was more important to him in his racing thoughts in that moment was that he and his beloved Nita would be joined for life as promised lovers in that place. It did not matter if a temple still stood there, his mother would unite them.

"You would not recognize it from here, Aris. You never saw it from this far back. You were kept safe at the temple your entire life before Vhale showed up." Luna said his name somewhat warmly. She had joined her son up on the deck. She embraced him from behind, obviously quite happy to be returning home regardless of what shape it was in. The forests were all in place around the island. She had worried that it would still be bare. The ground itself, left as she had ruined it, would never have been able to grow anything again without someone restoring the essence to the soil itself. Not many had the power to do it. Mannus had told them the truth. He stayed and took care of the temple in his last days.

The white male lupine pulled his cloak a little tighter to him, careful not to show his wings when he was outside his quarters. It was hard to say when someone could see, especially as thick and primordial as the forest around the lake seemed. An essence manifestation would be a pretty blatant advertisement of the Letai having returned. The former slave spoke in a hushed tone.

"Is this a jungle?" He'd heard of them before, as thick as they were, and with how tall the trees were. He'd never seen anything quite this impressive where vegetation was concerned.

“No, Alps. A jungle is the way it is because of how much water is available and the length of the growing season. These are mostly coniferous trees, see the needles?” She pointed out the bristly, long needle leaves which were easy enough to make out even as they drifted farther from shore and into the lake. “There are a lot of trees among them which lose their leaves in the fall, it’s very lovely that time of year.”

“I’ve seen plenty of them, I just... I never saw them so big.” He marveled as he craned his head up. They had to be at least 200 feet tall in places.

“They draw upon Luna’s Heart.” The priestess whispered in reverence. Alps looked at his mother’s chest. She put her hand over it and chuckled. “No, there is a very old and very powerful crystal under the temple itself named after the same Luna I’m named after. It’s a natural focus. It holds a very large amount of life energy that emanates from it over time. Many generations of Letai performed essence-drawing rituals and filled the crystal with potent life energy to be used for healing and the like. With no one to use this power, the life around here is bolstered by the energy, growing larger and more abundant. I had worried that it would have burned out with the spell I cast to attack Vhale so long ago. I’m glad to see it was shielded. I was supposed to use it to repair the damage I did. Maybe that’s what Vhale used. He would not have much life-essence ability left, I imagine. Not back then.” Luna rested against Alps’ back, her thick tail waving slowly.

As they watched, the island drew nearer and nearer. Nita and Nidaja were having breakfast down below them, and Lira was talking with Mytan about the kinds of things they would expect to see where they were going. None of the Shuraza clan had any idea where some of the more impressive high temples were, no one had dared to travel so far into the dark territories to find them. There was a lot for the two to discuss, as the knowledge they would bring back would be enough to fill books for years. Vhale was sleeping, seeming to have exhausted himself thoroughly helping shovel coal. As he slept, it was Lyat’s turn. Reika stayed with him there to keep him company, or perhaps just irritate him to madness, Alps was never sure which.

The sun was a bit higher in the sky when they finally came close enough for Alps and Luna to see that a structure still stood. A tall white spire at the highest point of the island. It was hard to see if, under the cover of the huge trees, there was any other building beneath the spire, but there was obviously something of importance there. As he watched it come closer, the white former slave became aware that Luna’s temple was actually taller than Nita’s home. Alps did not think there could ever be a larger structure than that. He had not even heard legends that there ever had been.

“I lived there?” he asked incredulously.

“Oh my...” Lira had joined them on the deck. Mytan took the steering again since he had locked it in place once they came out on to the lake. There was nothing to run into for a long way. He fine-tuned the steering again, and stood by Lira.

"I never thought I would see something like this." He whispered. "I had so many worries when you had me come with you, I even considered running away, but now, I see that would have been the biggest mistake of my entire life and I would have never known." The green-furred male lupine moved forward a little, holding onto the railing. Alps could tell that his heart was hammering. For as terrible and difficult as the journey had been for Alps, this was, it seemed, the high point to Mytan's life. He would have a story to share with his family for the rest of his life. Alps inhaled deeply. He would likely survive it, since he was taking the boat back once they got to the east side of the lake when they were finished at the temple.

"Is there anything dangerous there that we need to worry about?" asked Lira. Her mind was always on keeping the group safe. There had been plenty of occasions where they had recklessly done things that they should not have. Alps' entourage seemed to have a serious conflict with caution. Luna shrugged at that.

"It's been a very long time, and that kind of life energy attracts more than just plants. I can't promise there is nothing dangerous there. It's unlikely, based on the creatures that lived here before, but many things have likely changed since then, including permanent settlements of Uruk, though they would serve little purpose up here, so far from the supply routes and the actual edge of the queen's empire." She leaned forward a bit, looking at the island as it approached. "There's no dock there anymore, I bet. We might have to get our feet wet to get to land."

"I think we will survive that." Alps leaned back a little as he enjoyed the breeze.

"It's a bit cold, don't you think?" Lira added, seeming to think Alps was foolish for thinking so little of having to possibly get wet.

"We can warm up inside." He said frankly.

"We don't know if there's an inside." Lira replied.

"I am sure we'll be fine." Luna defended her son. "Besides, we can make a fire and dry our clothes. I really don't think we are going to be bothered here." Lira sighed, perhaps being more of a warm-weather wolf, and padded below deck to get her supplies in order. She did not like disembarking unless prepared, even when they stopped to resupply with fresh fruit along the way.

The rest of the trip toward the island was a flurry of getting things together and waterproofing what supplies they intended to take with them. There was a bit of food and drink that they opted to put together to celebrate Alps and Nita's binding, due to take place soon after getting to the island. Alps could barely stand with the level of nervousness and excitement running through him. He hardly even noticed the island getting closer and closer, the huge trees looming high overhead, blotting out the sun before they even had to anchor the ship. He would soon be joined with Nita, her choice in him a life-time promise. To have this blessing, that of life-binding at all was

unthinkable for him as a slave. To think Nita would have him was a child's fantasy, and as unrealistic a thing as Alps found their whole group trying to do. But, if he was going to be bound to Nita, he could think of no reason why he could not make the other thing happen.

Disembarking was actually fun for Alps. He carefully hopped down into the twelve foot deep water, not wanting his robes to be pulled up enough to show anyone his wings if he could help it. It was ice cold, but that never really bothered him, because he was used to taking cold baths all of his life. He floated their supplies to shore with four trips back and forth, before finally helping a barely tolerant Nita and Lira across. They could all swim, but swimming in the frigid waters was difficult. Nidaja had no trouble getting herself across, neither did the slightly hardy Mytan. Luna stripped down completely and dove in, opting to get dressed in dry clothes on the other side and having no shyness about it. Vhale followed her lead, having no consideration for himself really, and perhaps happy to swim in the nude with Luna, which Alps found a little odd. Lyat and Reika were the least pleased with getting into the cold water, but they finally did. Lyat had to pull Reika across, as she balled up and sank the moment the icy water shocked her muscles. Trying to hold onto Bone did not help her swim either and she complained the whole way across because the water smudged Bone's blank and staring face.

Once everyone was across it was a cold walk around the edge of the island until they found a very old, grown over pathway that lead further inward. Alps and Luna were the only ones not actively shivering, but no one really complained about the cold when enjoying the splendor of the tall forest trees towering impossibly high above them. As they pushed inward, the trees were considerably smaller, the growth not as old, as there had originally been a clearing around the temple where the trees were more sparse and likely decorative. As they entered this area, the white quartz walls of the temple became visible, green half way up with clinging moss and lichen, but gleaming bright as the light was able to hit the quartz more. Tall windows looked dark in the pale walls. There were no coverings or glass to cover the windows after so long. There were a few obvious wide cracks in the wall that did not seem to be caused by age, perhaps damage of Luna and Vhale's last fight. Alps looked back at them, and they looked around and marveled at how much it had changed, seeming not to even care that they last tried to kill one another in this place. What had changed so much since then?

Alps had a slight chill. He had changed that. Luna would have killed Vhale if he had not stopped her, and they seemed, in this moment, almost to be friends. Was that really his affect? Was there something more there all along waiting to be discovered, or did they become friends just because he would not let them be enemies? What if all conflict merely needed a voice to say stop? Alps shook away that naïve and childish thought. The world was insanely complex, but both Luna and Vhale had been in their own personal nightmares for centuries. The war died for them a long time ago. They might as well have been descendants of that great calamity. The real enemy had a face now, and Vhale was not it.

“Well, there’s still a door.” Lira rumbled, seeming to feel that concept meant it was a little safer in how she lightened up. It was not infested by monsters, perhaps. She moved over to the door and tried to open it.

“I would assume after this long, it’s pretty stuck.” Luna offered. The front double doors themselves were over twice as tall as Alps. Was there ever cause for them to be that large, he wondered? He tried his hand at them, finding them to not budge even though it did not seem to be locked. They just had not been opened in a long time. Lyat moved forward and gave it the hyena shoulder. There was a loud, unfortunate sounding crunch, but the door gave. And then fell inward, the powerful hyena having ripped the old wood right off its hinges. The plume of dust from inside told a story of a room not touched for centuries. Lyat cupped his muzzle, looking horrified. He broke the temple of a Letai High Priestess. He broke Luna’s front door.

“It’s alright, thanks for getting it open.” Luna whispered to him encourage and comfort him, appearing to know that he was mortified by what his reckless act had done. Alps stepped forward first. There was a very large hall that spanned to the left and right almost as far as he could see, roots and vines growing in through the windows covering the floor with soil and litter from centuries of seasonal growth. Directly in front of them however was a large door only a little smaller than the front door. Luna moved forward, holding out her hand. “Linista’tir curosmir tiruthu mirelda.” A globe of bright white light appeared floating above her hand.

“It seems to be a very social kind of layout...” Mytan spoke openly to Lira. He seemed to forget that he did not have to guess the function of the different parts of Luna’s temple, he could ask the one who lived there so long ago. Luna seemed to realize he was overlooking this, and, forgiving him, spoke up.

“Mass essence-drawings used to be performed here, in the inner chamber. It’s kind of like a coliseum. Crowds would gather, Lhap, Letai, Amanian, even Asuna, and there would be hours of singing, storytelling, and in some cases, far more carnal displays to incite just the right kind of essence, and then, the temple focus would draw the essence from all around, and the priestess would channel it into the crystal.”

“Temple focus?” asked Mytan and Lira both. They had not heard that before, and all new knowledge they hungered for.

“Someone who was very adept at drawing and holding onto Essence.” Luna answered as a casual matter of fact.

“So, someone could hold essence from a hundred or so people until it was transferred to your crystal here in the temple?” Mytan was not ashamed to ask all the questions that came to him. Lira took his hand, seeming glad he was asking.

“Mytan, the mass drawings here had as many as twelve thousand people.” Lira cupped her muzzle. Nita furrowed her brow.

“Who could handle holding that kind of essence, even for a little bit?” asked the queen. Her sister nodded at that. They knew at least enough about essence that they knew about burn-out... agony and even paralysis caused in the muscles when too much essence was channeled by one person.

“Someone who can manifest it outside their own body.” Luna rumbled in a blunt answer, looking at her son. Alps blushed a bit and looked away. He would have made a good focus in the temple. Perhaps there was a place for him in that future for mass essence drawings here in the temple occasionally while he enjoyed his life with Nita.

“How was the power transferred?” asked Lira.

“That depended on the priestess, usually. Some like long, solitary rituals that seem a lot like a cleansing ritual. I preferred something more primal and enjoyable.” She gave a hard look at Vhale who seemed to intentionally look away, taking in the sights. Alps blinked at that. A soft click announced that the curious Nidaja opened the next large set of doors.

“What’s in here?” she asked, her body still freezing even as the conversation made her feel a little warmer. She likely was imagining the same thing Alps was when Luna explained how the power was transferred. Luna pleasuring Alps in the middle of a crowd of cheering Letai. That was perhaps more common then, but it was pretty taboo in more current Amani. Luna answered as she moved forward to shed light into the room.

“It’s the temple meeting hall.” She answered. Inside, as the light shone brightly with Luna entering the room, it seemed there was far less dust. The air was stale, but that was filtering out quickly, but with the door closed all that time, far less dust had been able to settle in the room and the weather had been kept out. There was a massive table in the room that looked like a long banquet table. There would likely have been a dozen candle holders on the table in times of meetings, but the plane of hardwood was bare at the moment. There were simple but elegant chairs, a total of 24 it seemed, a dozen on either side. At the farthest point of the table was a much larger chair, the dark hardwood gilded in silver, the back much higher and capped with a single white crystal. The moment Luna came closer, it glowed brightly. Alps’ pulse quickened. He was actually seeing a place he recognized, but it was just a very faint image in the back of his subconscious. Then his eyes moved upward. There was a very large painting above the chair he knew to be his mothers. There were two figures in the image brightly illuminated by the crystal in Luna’s chair.

The first person in the image that Alps could instantly recognize was his mother, wearing the long, dark green velvety robes of a Priestess of Life. She looked young and beautiful, her hair so neatly and pristinely groomed, and her eyes half closed in a sweet and loving gaze. This was a face that Alps only sometimes still saw in Luna. This was someone who had not endured 700 years of suffering. He saw it more and more, and

he liked that he was bringing that Luna back. In the picture with Luna was someone Alps did not really recognize though, and his pace quickened again, because he realized there was an entire world that he left behind, people that lived so long ago that connected him to a world that he was a part of, but no longer. The figure was two heads shorter than Luna, and the immediately overwhelming fact about the individual was that it a white-furred Lhap.

The short, petite fox looked almost female at first, but closer scrutiny in the fact that he wore no shirt, just an ornate loincloth, proved that this was a male. His enormous ears splayed out from almost one side of the painting to the other, looking so incredibly soft to the touch that Alps immediately wished he could touch them. His hair was a little wild in places, but the length of it was tamed in a braided ponytail that rested down his chest over his shoulder, violet beads and a coil of leather holding the end tightly bound. His eyes were bright violet with slightly darker edges and pupils were narrow, typical to Lhap. His lean body seemed strong and well maintained, and he seemed as clean and pristine as Luna. Alps looked down around their feet where they stood. This Lhap's pillowy tail curled completely around their feet and up along Luna's robed thigh. It was obscene the amount of tail this fox actually had. Alps had not seen Lhap so much as to expect this, but this was a very striking creature. He had an earring in one ear that held the Letai crest and a pendant with the same. Alps looked back to his mother and pointed at the figure, wagging his tail a bit. He remembered the discussion from just a moment ago. She had a focus she would have been very close to and could handle a lot of essence. The Lhap were rumored to have been where some of the strongest Letai initially came from generations before.

"This must have been your focus!" Alps barked happily, feeling certain that he was right. Luna looked up somewhat dreamily at him.

"Oh wow..." Nita said in a half-whisper, her inner ears going scarlet. "It would not be wise to leave me unmonitored with that fox. Nidaja, I have learned something new about my most intimate interests that I did not know before." Her tail wagged briskly. "I am painfully allured by him, he just seems so..." She seemed unable to place it exactly. It was Vhale who finally answered with a smirk on his face.

"Like his son." He put a hand on Alps' shoulder.

Leal rested beside Ceriss on a pillow that seemed a bit extravagant for something the size of the considerably smaller lapine. They did like their puffy cushion things. The pillow he was on was covered in a velvety material which he could swear came from the outside of a plant, but he was not sure which. It was interesting to see it used in this way. He sipped at a drink that seemed to be made of some kind of fruit, and while no one had specifically said it, he was pretty sure it was fermented. He felt loose and happy. Two lapine females continued to top off their wide, shallow cups with

the stuff. It was golden in color and very pleasant, served warm. After the pair left again, he looked to Ceriss, sharing a small hut that was assigned to them. He whispered softly,

“Are you sure we should be having them spoil us like this? It would be one thing if we just came back and they insisted, but you requested it.” He looked at the lovely white Lhap-disguised female wolf as she sprawled on her own pillow, sized closer to the lapine villagers to show how much larger the pillow was than it needed to be. There were no beds here, they seemed to like cushions better, and it seemed they traded the things as gifts. A lot of care went into making them.

“Leal, there is a level of expectation of us here to enjoy the fruit of the village, as it were. We will enjoy it any way we like, and I will not feel at all guilty about it. Do you know why?” She had that tone of wisdom in her voice, like Leal was learning some kind of lesson. He usually did when she spoke that way. He sat up, taking another sip.

“Why is that?” he asked curiously.

“Because they feel awful for making us do that.” The priestess sipped as well. Leal tilted his head.

“They have been freed. They thought we were heroes and we turned out to be. That’s kind of what I got from that.” He offered.

“They hoped we were heroes, but they still held us hostage here, neat and tidy as it were, unless we helped. So that we sup of their wine and dine on their fruit brings their hearts peace. Leal, enjoy them, or it will darken the joy to come.” The guard gritted his teeth, surprised by the sage and sound reason behind what he thought might have been insulting their hosts. Based on how they had been acting in regard to her requests, he felt that she had to be telling the truth. She continued. “There will be an unpaid price in their hearts if we leave and take nothing, ask nothing, and they gain everything. Look at them. The honor of the group is paramount, whether it is a paradise or there’s tyranny. That they required our help we don’t deny, or I would have refused outright, but do we deny ourselves pleasure knowing that it leaves their hearts in debt?” Leal leaned forward, astounded by Ceriss’ level of perception. Was this something natural to her, or was it common to the Letai? Still, he felt that they could well risk overstaying their welcome after too long. Three days of rest, no limit to food or drink, and any civil request they could make in that time. Then again, much of what the Letai did that he knew of was wrapped in careful diplomacy. Keeping peace was very much a part of what they did before the war.

As he mulled that over, the lapine female who Ceriss and Neph had met outside the village initially came in, opening the heavy cloth flap that acted as a door in a place that needed no locks. Leal looked up at her and smiled welcomingly. Ceriss sat up, crossing her legs, hands between her thighs as she energized a bit at seeing the familiar visitor.

“Everything is meeting with your desires, I hope?” she asked, a genuine tone of care in her voice. She seemed almost achingly sweet, as if it was all she knew. It made Leal think that outside of this terror, there was not much suffering to be had here. He felt a little out of place in the face of that. Everything about him was hardened by war in some respects, but it was that toughness that was needed for what finally delivered the rabbits from their problem.

“For the most part, yes.” Ceriss stated. Leal twitched a little, feeling that her tone made it seem that something was lacking. The girl seemed to pick up on it right away. She put both her hands in front of her hips and bowed a little, looking over to Ceriss carefully.

“Oh, is there anything else that you need, or any way that I can make your time with us more rewarding?” she asked. Leal could still not shake the feeling that she was being used a bit.

“Indeed... What did you say your name was again?” Ceriss asked. She looked up, her expressive brown eyes keen on the demands of their heroes.

“Vernicia.” She stood tall. Perhaps the name meant something. Much of their culture was lost on the group, as they had not been there long enough. What Leal knew of them made him like the lapine people thus far. She stepped closer, the soft jingle of the tiny bells along the hem of her skirt adding a musical flare to her every movement. Ceriss leaned back into her pillows, sipping upon her wine again. “Bare your body, please.” Leal’s heart nearly stopped. What kind of a thing was that for a guest to say? Was the wine too much for the priestess?

“B-bare?” she stammered, her eyes wide. Leal wanted to dismiss what the priestess had said, but when he looked back over to the white-furred Lhap female, she had her eyes narrowed, fixed on her ‘quarry’ and she seemed absolutely serious.

“Err...” Leal started. Vernicia moved a hand to her shoulder, and pulled down the top of the delicate fabric, and then drew the garment smoothly down her body. Leal’s heart hammered. He did not expect her to easily complete this task without asking more questions or trying to offer something else instead. Surely Ceriss would be overstepping her bounds. He looked back to the lovely lapine, however. Her body was a curvy wonderland of feminine beauty, and her rich brown fur seemed too soft to be tolerated. Her breasts were neither too large nor too small, seeming model-perfect for her body. She looked healthy and strong, and the flare of her hips suggested long family-lines and good fortune to whoever captured her heart. Leal shook his head a little and looked back at Ceriss, trying not to actually outright stare. What was his lover’s purpose in asking to see Vernicia naked?

“Come close to me, Vernicia.” Ceriss’ tone was as soft and smooth as the rabbit’s fur. She folded her ears back and blushed scarlet, that much was east to see

where the fur was a little thinner, but she moved over to the fox. She was only just slightly taller than Ceriss when she was in the Lhap form, but this was not as obvious at the moment because of the fact that the priestess was so comfortably relaxed on the pillows that she was very nearly laying down. Ceriss sat up and slipped a hand up along the back of Vernicia's leg, and over the smooth curve of her rump, making the girl gasp loudly, eyes wide. Leal gritted his teeth. The priestess was not drunk, she knew exactly what she was doing.

"This is what you desire, Ceriss?" she asked, seeming a little meek and unsure. Leal was pained to hear that the tone in her voice was not of offense, but worry that she might not meet the priestess' standards.

"We Letai draw upon energy from each-other in this way that we use in order to face such dark things, Vernicia." Ceriss rumbled softly. "We have drawn a lot from one another and this has left us very tired, and we need energy undrawn, untapped, something fresh. Young and virile." Leal's heart beat faster. She was going to draw from the lapines? Was this allowed? Did Vernicia even understand what Ceriss intended to do? There was a hot gasp from her and Leal refocused as he saw Ceriss lean forward and push a warm kiss right between the lapine girl's thighs. Her eyes locked on the wolf's, and he could not look away as they seemed slightly afraid for but a second, and then the priestess put her fast, agile vulpine tongue to work, fluttering it rapidly in a way that Leal could not see, but could certainly see the effect of. Vernicia nearly buckled, her knees bending, head moving forward and down and hands catching Ceriss' shoulders.

At first, he thought that she was going to push the priestess away in embarrassment and defensiveness, but she just held the white Lhap's shoulders as she kept her mouth over the bunny's sex. Vernicia's eyes were wide for a moment more, and then softened, closed, and her ears went from straight up, to splayed outward and down, her thighs pushing together and spreading apart in slow rhythm. Leal looked into her eyes with concern as she opened them slowly, fixed upon him as Ceriss dined upon her honey so brazenly.

"I am not... familiar with this... ceremony." She huffed, her little teardrop of a tail flitting as she arched her back. Ceriss moved back closer to the pillows and pulled Vernicia onto her knees slowly. The rabbit gladly did this, since she was having trouble standing steady where she was. As Ceriss got comfortably, and pulled her robes open for Leal to see that she was very willingly aroused, and teasingly exhibiting her pink vulpine folds to him. She moved a hand down between her thighs and pushed her fingers side to side, making a very graphic display of her body for the wolf who was already painfully aroused just from seeing her shameless treatment of their lapine host.

"It's not so ceremonial really, but she is right. Your energy is strong. It will help the priestess recover her strength from the fight." Leal suspected that Vernicia could barely hear anything he was saying, as her thighs tightened and relaxed around Leal's head. She began to breathe more heavily, and even embraced her own round breasts,

fingers over her nipples not in shame, but to tease herself a bit. Ceriss pulled her mouth off of Vernicia as she started to make tense, anxious whimpering sounds. The rabbit looked with some panic over her shoulder at Leal.

“This is good?” she asked, seeming anxious.

“Turn... Face my guardian.” Ceriss spoke softly, panting as well, moving her hand away from her puffy wet sex. Leal’s masculinity jumped a bit in his trousers with need. “Leal...” Ceriss’ tone was just as honeyed for him as it was for their host. “Undress as well. I am finding lapine scent and flavor has a potent effect on me and I need for you to tend me. I think this will be something Vernicia enjoys too.”

“T-tend?” The rabbit turned slowly, and sat down over Ceriss’ muzzle, the little vulpine priestess immediately resuming her pleasuring of their new friend. Leal pulled his trousers down, hard enough that his cock sprang back and slapped his lower belly as the waistline cleared, making him flinch a bit. He was a good deal larger than Vernicia, and even larger still than this form of Ceriss, which made him feel disproportionately potent in their company. He moved between his priestess’ outstretched thighs, and pulled her hips up, letting his cock rest on the fox’s tummy. Vernicia did not seem to have any compunction about staring at this. He rolled his thighs a little, watching openly as well since he was being given a better view of Ceriss’ mouth cupped tightly over a likely equally tight rabbit. Vernicia began to shake.

“Letai are pretty well learned about such things.” Leal said soothingly. “No need to fight it. Do as your body tells you, you are among friends.” He said this more for himself than for her, but he widened his eyes a bit as her hand slipped around his cock. She stroked his full length with first one hand, then the other, wrapping both around him. His girth was of the most interest to her as she drew in a deep, shuddering breath, and then lowered his head against Leal’s shoulder as she quietly, but obviously climaxed upon Ceriss’ fluttering, darting, and sometimes deeply penetrating tongue. Leal rolled his thighs, pushing back and forth as he watched the girl’s hands fold together as if praying, letting that thick wolf-cock penetrate her hands.

“I’m being greedy... Aheh... I shall share.” She panted, and, as Leal pushed his hips forward, she pushed his cock downward, angled just right with perfect timing, he felt cupping hands give way to very tight vulpine honeypot. Ceriss gave a long, low groan, and pushed her hips forward a little to hilt Leal completely. He pulled her hips up a little, and then smiled as he watched Vernicia lean back, hips pushing back to Ceriss’ mouth. She seemed very interested in watching.

“Good girl...” Ceriss said in a quick pant, catching her breath. Leal took pride in making this nicer for the rabbit, and began to really put in a hot, heavy rhythm for Vernicia to heat up over as she was pushed steadily toward another climax. It was Ceriss who was heating up, however. Leal watched the expressions of rapt interest in Vernicia’s eyes as he pumped his lover, feeling her impossibly tight smaller sex pulling at him. This was not mere illusion, there was a physical change that was used for this

technique that he could not hope to understand. However, when he glanced down, he finally understood part of why Ceriss was getting so wet so fast. The rabbit daringly pushed her digits at the apex of the priestess' sex, stirring her rapidly, making it obvious that, as sweet and gentle as Vernicia was, she was not utterly innocent. Ceriss popped first, making quite a lot of wetness for Leal to plow into as the rabbit hunkered against him, chin over his shoulder as she gave a long, hot cry, being unable to restrain herself that time.

Vernicia cried out again as she was suddenly pulled quickly down the priestess' smaller body, then had her shoulders gripped to lay her back against the fox beneath her. Leal understood what Ceriss wanted, and he moved himself forward, pumping away at the fox's spasming sex as his chest pushed against the bunny's. Ceriss wanted to focus on essence-drawing a moment and could not if she was cumming constantly from sustained naughty Vernicia fingers.

"L-Leal! I can't take this! Nnh!" The rabbit moved a hand down and startled Leal as she pulled the wolf out of Ceriss' soaking pussy and angled him up, making it so his next hard stroke had him pubic-bone to pubic-bone deep inside her still shuddering depths. Having not expected this, the why the intensity played out in his head and over his length, the wolf nearly spilled his seed that very moment. He jerked to a stop, got control of himself, and then began pumping again. Vernicia gave a hard cry, tightening like a vice around him, and then pouring her heat over Ceriss' own sex. Ceriss barked her approval.

"It's alright, take her! Hard, Leal!" The priestess growled hotly, cupping Vernicia's breasts. Submitting to the priestess made some sense to Leal, but in a matriarchal society, her opening up for him was not as expected. He felt a welling need, and he drove himself hard against the rabbit. She squeaked out cutely, and wrapped her arms around Leal. Her hands spread over his back and he comforted himself upon the softest fur he'd ever experienced. His hips hammered heavily enough that even Ceriss' body was shaken, making her grunt a little as the wolf over them both had his way with their host.

Vernicia's next climax felt to Leal like it must have been brutal, if not a little painful. She shook violently, gripping Leal tightly.

"I..." Leal gave a low growl. He didn't want to just flood Vernicia without warning, but before he could say anything, she kissed him. She cupped his mouth good and tight, and he shuddered, firing his load hard into her eagerly claiming nearly suckling heat. He felt her hips buck and her mouth released his.

"Aaaaaahhahh! Oh by the wind, I'm made!" Leal was not sure he'd ever heard that exclamation before, but it was followed by her wrapping arms and legs around his body and clamping as tight as she could before exploding around him, her sex convulsing and shuddering as she climaxed as violently as he'd ever felt a lover do, her constricting sex suckling every drop out of him. Ceriss panted heavily, but seemed

relaxed, happily drawing the essence of them both. Leal finally lowered his head a little and gave along, lilting growl, happily spent for the moment as he held Vernicia close against the smaller priestess and kissed her again. The rabbit crooned with satisfaction, though a bit of a mess between her thighs as Leal had not been neat and tidy about his own release, having continued pumping his cock to pleasure her to her highest peak even as she gushed around him.

Finally, he lowered his head and kissed the bunny tenderly, his hips mashing up tight and snug against her own as she kept him wrapped up in her arms and legs. Leal drew slowly out of her finally, grinning as he looked into her eyes, enjoying the expression of satisfaction upon her face. As he admired his 'work' he squeaked softly at the feel of Ceriss' legs snaring his backside, pulling him forward, and sinking him right back into her own body again.

"You can't possibly think you're finished here, my love." She crooned. Leal's heart sped up. He winced a bit as he was pulled in tighter. He had not considered that he would have to keep going, but he typically did not have more than one lover to tend to.

"I don't think my tide of essence is gonna be very useful by this point." Leal offered with some anxiousness.

"I don't want your essence, I want the bellyful you just gave Vernicia." The rabbit giggled, slipping down off of Ceriss, letting her hold Leal, but she slipped down alongside the pair, caressing the slightly overly-large-for-a-Lhap breasts. Leal groaned a bit, but nodded. He would not keep a priestess wanting. He held close and began to pump his thighs. The first few moments of this were a bit grueling, but he began to feel almost a fury and a drive to keep going at the prodding of the priestess. The discomfort did not last too long, and he felt re-energized as his hips slapped hers firmly. He felt a gentle hand stroke his back, over his tail, over his thighs. The rabbit was exploring them both now that she was content and full.

"I'm starting to think I really like this Letai thing." Vernicia spoke softly, but seemed giddy. Leal grunted and moved faster and harder. He was determined that the priestess would not be able to draw from him when he was done, even if she wanted to, because he would have her at her peak when he went. This was not so hard as he thought it might be, given that Ceriss was still smoldering from the last release. In a few moments of rather frantic, feral, aggressive ravaging, She bucked hard against him, cried out, and the tide opened up again. Ceriss happily plateaued for her lover, grinding, squirming, crying, groaning, and Leal finally got over the discomfort and enjoyed the ride.

The natural build-up to his peak was a lot smoother the second time around, he found, and this gave him something of an appreciation for what his role as a lover might be if he used that determination for essence drawing with the priestess. He could be quite useful to her if he mastered this kind of thing. He heard a soft, sinking cry from

behind him, and looked over his shoulder, his anxiousness rising rapidly as he saw Vernicia doubled over, hand between her thighs, other on Ceriss' knee as she used her fingertips to strum herself to a selfish little climax. Seeing that, knowing how much the rabbit was actually enjoying this too, that was all it took.

Finally, Leal gave a sharp cry, flinching a little as he just tipped off the end of his pleasure, and sprayed his thick spunk hard inside Ceriss' convulsing depths. She wailed loudly, surely making their actions in that hut plain and obvious to anyone even reasonably nearby. Leal ground hard into her, making sure to give it to her deep, knowing Ceriss seemed to like it that way. He gasped as he felt his sack stroked from behind encouragingly by Vernicia. She lovingly petted him as he flooded the white vulpine beauty, and then he finally slumped down over her and let himself rest.

He felt Vernicia pull up close alongside them both, wrapping an arm and a leg over them. Despite having been a guest in this essence drawing, she held her friends like lovers, and the obscene softness of her fur made that absolutely perfect for the drowsy, happy wolf and fox.

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 20

The picture stared back at the former slave silently, as pictures typically do. Meager oil and pitch torches cast a soft orange glow across the large entryway and waiting area where long, low cushioned seats stretched along the walls. If there had been other furniture in the waiting area, it was not there anymore. It seemed like it would have needed tables or additional chairs for how empty the space was at the bottom of the stairs. Alps shook his head again slowly. It was, perhaps, the fourth or fifth time that evening he had come back to this entry hall. He gasped lightly when he felt a touch at his arm. It was his beloved, slipping her arm around his.

“Are you going to come to sleep, Alps? We have a long and happy day ahead of us for tomorrow, I would hate to see you worn around the edges for that.” Nita had been able to tell right away that Vhale’s words struck him hard. There was a silence as Alps inhaled deeply, and then looked back up at the picture. The image of his mother did not look much different than she looked that very day. Alps had grown up without Luna, and they were not so far apart in physical age at least. And the individual in the picture with her had been dead for more than 700 years.

“Do you think I look like him?” Alps asked, indicating the fox. Nita tilted her head a little, and blushed. She was, perhaps, recalling her words from earlier that day, her initial reaction to the picture of the fox in the image.

“I hope it would not pain you to know... that I do see some resemblance there.” She gripped her lover a little tighter. “This is not a bad thing either, since I mentioned... I was very attracted to this fox when I first saw him, but I do not know if it’s because I feel that way about foxes, or that he just reminds me a little of you.” Nita was trying to discourage Alps from going into a funk over this, he could tell, but he was having trouble relaxing, and knew if he could not get his feelings about the issue off of his chest, he might well lose a lot of sleep over it. He shook his head a bit as he considered what Nita was telling him. Of course she would not care that he was half fox. This changed nothing for her.

“I do not mind if I look a little like him, I know I took after my mother perhaps a bit more... at least, no one’s ever said, ‘hey, you look like you might be half fox’ or anything.” Alps was conflicted not in being upset about his heritage, but in that he did not know how he should feel at all. Why had his mother never thought to tell him this?

Was it something that was a problem somehow? There had to be more to it than his father just being a fox.

"You have a little longer and fuller tail than most, and your ears are perhaps a bit more... ahh... stately, shall we say." Nita kissed the back of Alps' neck. The white lupine leaned back against his queen, letting her hold him a bit in her arm. "What troubles you, my love?" Nita finally asked openly.

"It just seems odd that as the Letai were struggling against Mannus..." He paused a bit, trying to compose his thoughts. He did not want to seem silly in his contrivances. "It seems odd that my mother would have fallen for a simple Lhap islander. Even one who was, as she stated, brave and regal and dashing as this one." He nodded to his father. Nita squeezed Alps' hand.

"If her initial reaction to him was anything like mine, I imagine it was not a difficult stretch." Nita confessed. "Perhaps you should worry less about finding some special meaning in having a fox father, and just enjoy the prospective future of your Emerald Amanian life-mate." She nipped Alps on the ear, making him giggle a bit.

"I should hope that you would have no negative feelings at all about this." Luna's voice cut in. Alps looked up, blushing a bit at seeming to lament his own father. He did not want his mother to suffer from his discomfort; it had little to do with her at present.

"I'm not upset," he stated honestly, "I'm just... about the most surprised as I think I've ever been." Alps held Nita's hand, not wanting to be offensive in his mother's temple. Luna wore one of her more traditional outfits, a lightly pleated hunter green skirt and a tunic that barely covered the bottom of her breasts. It was perhaps intended to attract some attention for her first night back in her old home. Alps suspected she intended to enjoy Mytan, since she had rather enjoyed how much attention he was willing to give to her. Alps looked away from the beautiful priestess. How could he even tell her what he was concerned about?

"I imagined you would be. I've always intended to tell you, but every time I thought I might, you were getting into wars, or being snatched by crazy hyena girls, or what-have-you." She sat down on the low ledge directly under the image. "Dias was very much like you. He loved to rush in and help everybody, even if it meant his life. That is something you share very much of your father. That you held any bit of his spirit is what made you being intimately involved with royalty less surprising when I discovered this was the case." Luna seemed rather happier to have Alps know this truth about his family, at least. Nita let her lover sit by his mother and he looked to her.

"Was this kind of arrangement common then? Foxes and wolves, I mean?" he asked. Luna looked at her son curiously.

"You are concerned that your existence is taboo?" she asked. "Even if it were then, the entire society is gone. If we succeed in what we are doing, it would not matter to the public at large if you were half Slink, you'd be welcomed." She gave a coy grin.

"I am concerned that I'm the only one." Alps felt he could openly state that side of his worry, if not the other. That was at least somewhat at the center of the dilemma for him. He hated being special. Finding out that he was Letai was frustrating enough, that separated him terribly from his friends and lovers, but finding out that even among the Letai he was unusual was even more difficult for him.

"Alps, the Amanian Letai all have fox-blood. This is not such an unusual idea." Nita looked up at that.

"I didn't know that." She plaintively shrugged. Nita was well versed in the running of her kingdom, but the world of 700 years prior was not high on her list of priorities, Alps knew. Misty probably knew all about it, however. Why had she not mentioned to Alps that he was different? The former slave bit his lip a little. Of course. She would have known that sort of thing would bother him. Luna continued.

"I suppose some lore faded over time, but it's true. So let me explain. The original Letai were from the Lhap islands over the sea to the West. Being born Letai for them was not a matter of family line, they seemed to skip generations, sometimes a dozen before a Letai was born among them, but when they did show up, they were very powerful, if somewhat innocent and tender and playful." Luna stroked Alps' cheek, as if to imply that such a thing described him. Perhaps at one time it might have, but his life did not really allow for it. "They used their power for healing exclusively. They also performed powerful seals to block dark energies and the like. Their use for the power was simple enough, but believe me when I say that they had a much greater capacity for storing that power, and for summoning it up again. For a few generations the fox Letai mixed with the Amanians, but at the barest whiff of war starting up, they wanted nothing at all to do with that, and virtually overnight they were all gone. They believed that they were the cause of the Amanian suffering and in their numbers, as mere healers, could not hope to stand against the darkness. Only a few remained. Even now, the Lhap which live on the peninsula are descended only of those Lhap who did not bear that power. The ancient Letai have gone over the sea where the dark one could not reach them. If they even exist now I could not say. But one of those who stayed was your father, Alps. That is why you have the capacity for drawing as much essence energy as you do."

"I'm half Ancient Letai?" Alps asked incredulously. It was not enough to just be part fox, it seemed. This did not help him to feel less separated from those he loved. He then furrowed his brow, something else suddenly occurring to him, and he felt a heavy weight drop into his heart.

"Three quarters actually." Whale spoke this time. Luna looked up, seeming slightly startled. He leaned back against the wall by the door, clad in the simple black

and white robe that he had been travelling with for the most part. He looked well-groomed and clean, and also somewhat small and harmless in the outfit. He was not a fighter, and seemed like he would fit better behind a huge pile of books. His long hair cascaded down his back and over the front of his shoulders and chest, gleaming as if wet in the firelight. He was taking himself seriously in his grooming before the planned event.

“Good evening Vhale. This was obviously a public chat, come on in.” Nita growled. Alps was lost in thought and did not try to suppress Nita’s loathing. Luna cut in.

“No, he is correct to tell Alps. That’s fair. I don’t want him to feel I am being intentionally mysterious in all of this.”

“What is he talking about?” Alps finally asked, trying to hide his exasperation. Surely it was not what it was starting to sound like. The priestess leaned back against the wall a bit, seeming to reminisce a little.

“My mother was a fox as well. She did not have any power, but it’s believed that I benefitted from the pairing.” Luna confessed.

“Youngest High Priestess in Amani’s history.” Vhale offered. There seemed to be a bit of compliment intended to that, and his tone was amicable toward Luna, but Alps could not focus on that fact in that moment. He felt sick.

“Wait a minute...” Alps stood up, standing beside Nita.

“You really should have explained this stuff to him sooner, Luna.” Vhale stated, seeming genuinely content to just be discussing it with them like family, to Nita’s irritation.

“I don’t want to do this right now with such important things planned so soon, but it won’t do to have it come up later.” Luna sighed. Nita stood between them and Alps.

“Please stop this. Tomorrow is an important day for me. I won’t have it spoiled by dramatic nonsense. Whatever you and your family did with those adorable foxes is in the past, Alps is mine now and I intend to enjoy every part of him, fox or wolf, forever. None of your complications of the past mean anything now.” Nita pulled at Alps’ hand to lead him away, but he stuck fast. The thought that had been nagging him was all but confirmed with the situation as it had been explained. He had to know, and he had to know right then. He spoke coldly.

“It’s the same as Rios.” Alps stated flatly. He then narrowed his eyes at Vhale. “You are half-fox too.”

“Only half here, but yes.” He admitted freely. “you are easily twice the fox I am, Alps.” He chuckled, still not seeming to understand that Alps was becoming visibly upset. Vhale was not well versed in social cues.

“I’m about to fireball you, Mannus.” Nita growled, not caring about his social ineptitude at that moment. Alps ignored it, and spoke again, looking through his mother at the wall, feeling cold.

“I’m a carefully made weapon.” He stated flatly. Luna cupped her muzzle, shaking her head. Vhale gritted his teeth as well, the light-hearted feeling sucked out of him in an instant.

“No!” His mother whimpered. Nita dropped his hand and backed up. She looked horrified. It was obvious she did not suspect where his questions were leading.

“Alps, hold on.” Vhale approached him. Nita balled up her fists, gritting her teeth. She seemed about ready to launch into a tirade against him. Alps spoke before she could, however.

“I was bred just to kill you.” He looked at the dark-furred male, his beautiful face lit with an orange glow on obsidian black by torchlight from the walls. This revelation did not even make him flinch.

“No, you weren’t.” Vhale stated loudly, but Alps interrupted him again.

“It makes more sense than anything else I can even remotely think of.” Alps growled. Nita held a hand up to touch Alps, but seemed to think better of stopping him. Luna spoke with an obvious lump in her throat.

“Alps, I loved your father. That is all that bound us. No plots, no plans, no dark intentions about you. War is a terrible thing, I would never have made you do such dark things. I hoped the war would be long over before you became even old enough to understand what war was!” The priestess seemed on the verge of tears. The former slave looked to the dark-furred male.

“Vhale, when you saw me the first time... When you saw me as a child, did you know what I was?” Alps asked point blank.

“Yes.” Vhale answered matter-of-factly. He would not lie to Alps.

“Did you Shadowfall me because you knew I was part ancient Letai?” Alps asked.

“Yes. As stated before though... that act was... beyond what my heart could stand. That was influenced the most by the darkness of anything I did.” He seemed to know this did not make it better, but he did not hold back his answer.

“But that meant the dark one knew I was a threat.” Alps stated coldly. Vhale suddenly put his nose right near Alps’ own, causing him to back up a step. He was not used to aggression from the former warlord. He spoke with a touch of fatherly scorn in his voice.

“Alps, stop this. Your mother might hide the truth because she’s ashamed of the hardship she’s brought you, and Nita might try to convince you to look away from a truth because she cannot bear to see you hurting, but I owe you no such sentiment. More than anyone here, I will tell you like it is, and your mother did not breed you with dark intent. I knew that fact without question the moment I saw the memories of the crystal heart of this place.” Luna widened her eyes at Vhale. Nita looked a little surprised too. Alps did not pay their surprise at that much mind.

“What am I supposed to think? Even if that was not her original intent, look at what’s happened. All that’s happened. Here we are, heading out to attack the dark one. I could be a weapon, just as I said. That could have happened. I cannot help but wonder if what my purpose may have always been was nothing more than what I am doing now.” He sat down and leaned back against the wall. Luna leaned over and held one of his hands. Nita took his other, sitting at his other side. Vhale spoke again.

“Alps, your life was not kept secret. You were celebrated when you were born. You were intended for great things, yes, but you misunderstand what those with your ability were originally considered good for.” Vhale spoke with a tone of authority.

“Vhale, I think he understands that already.” Luna stated.

“No, I don’t. What was my fate to be?” Alps asked. He looked up to Vhale, very much expecting the truth.

“You were, like your father, to be the temple focus of the Letai Temple of Life, here.” Vhale nodded.

“So, I was supposed to...” Alps thought a moment about that.

“Your father stood by the priestess and drew upon the energy of those who visited the temple, pleasure, joy, happiness alike, and he channeled that energy into the crystal here, Luna’s Heart. A priestess can draw from a few at a time, perhaps, but Alps, you could, if trained, draw energy from crowds. That has always been used to heal the sick and injured, sometimes hopeless. That was the future your mother had planned for you. It was never anything but that. The only ones who could think that she would raise a child to wage war are fools. Like you and me.” Vhale looked to Luna with heavy apology upon his face. Alps then just crumpled against Luna and quietly cried, hugging his mother, apologizing for even suspecting something so awful of her. Nita wiped tears away and leaned against her lover’s shoulder. The three of them rested against one another like that for a while, Vhale leaning against the wall off to the side with his arms crossed. The black-furred wolf glanced over to Alps lover.

“See there? It was not so bad letting them get this out of the way, Nita.” Whale rarely spoke directly to the queen in front of Alps. The former slave looked up, wiping his wet nose-pad on a sleeve. He opened his mouth to speak, but it was the queen who spoke first.

“I will promise to you both, that Alps’ parentage, his bloodline, makes absolutely no difference to me.” The queen stated this solidly. Whale smiled to her.

“You say this now, but I would like to remind you... Your children may look far more like Alps’ father than he does. The ears are known to skip one generation before being diluted out by the bloodline.” The manner in which Whale said this made it seem a lot like he spoke from experience. Nita snapped a glance to Luna, who shrugged and nodded.

“Possible, yes.” Nita’s lip quivered a little. Her eyes were round. Alps tensed up a bit, having not even considered the effect of his heritage on his children. Was that going to cause a problem for the royal family?

“There’s a chance they won’t...” Alps stated hopefully, fearing Nita was considering this complication. He didn’t have long to fret.

“They would be so adorable!” the queen squealed loudly, and took Alps by the hands, bouncing up and down on her heels, looking up at the picture of Alps’ father. Alps bounced a bit with her, a little surprised, but was finally simply led away by the queen. She would not take no for an answer, they had already been up far longer than she had intended to allow him to be. The evening had brought too much complication already, and she wanted to be well rested for the new day. This would be the last night they would spend as mere slave and mistress. The following sunset would have them as one, together at last. Alps may continue to serve her, but it would be as her life-mate.

As they moved away, Luna looked back to Whale, as she still sat on the cushioned ledge that ran along the wall in this entryway where the picture hung. He seemed quiet as he looked at the image as well. The priestess inhaled deeply, realizing she was alone with him again, but her feelings were greatly magnified by a new revelation.

“Did you really look into Luna’s heart?” she finally asked softly.

“Did you ever know me to have the ability to regrow a forest blighted by the darkest essence blast imaginable before that day?” Whale asked. Luna recoiled a little, having not even considered it before that point. That was not the kind of thing Whale was known to be able to do. He was originally researching crystal-smithing and exotic essence. The prospect of what Whale was telling her had her complete undivided attention.

“She let you just look in?” Luna asked. “The spirit of the original?”

“After all I had done, she left me no choice. You awakened her with your attack, and she was not happy. I was severed, for a time, from the dark one. I had that time to reflect on what I had done. At the time, I did not understand. I thought I had merely gone mad. His voice was gone. Her voice commanded me then. And hopeless and wretched, I obeyed.”

“And you felt her love?” Luna asked knowingly.

“I did.” Vhale whispered.

“So that is why the dark one lost control of you...” Luna cupped her muzzle.

“I did not wish to tell you this earlier. I am sure you understand why.” Vhale spoke softly.

“Because so many of my own very personal memories are there. You thought right, I might have been angry. Not so much now, but if you told me the day you got out of your Shadowfall, Alps would not have been able to save you.”

“Luna, I know that you never intended Alps to be a weapon, but do you think somehow fate did? Do you ever feel that we are playing parts that we cannot help but play?” Vhale asked thoughtfully.

“You will not find solace in thinking that you never had a choice, Vhale.” Luna murmured softly. “The only comfort left for you is that which you do now, not in who is to blame for what was done before.” Vhale inhaled deeply at that, and then sighed out with a long, slow breath.

“So, what is it I am to do now, if that is to be the salvation of my tortured essence?” he asked. His wounds were obviously deep, self-inflicted, and to him, hideous. Luna leaned toward him and whispered,

“In this moment, for now... It is not what you do, but what you cannot do.” Her whispered tone was right in his ear.

“What can I not do?” Vhale asked.

“Escape...” Luna gripped his wrist, pulled it up to the wall above his head, and slipped herself fully into his seated lap, mouth sealing against his own as her other hand cupped against his collarbone, holding him back against the wall. Vhale tightened up hard in shock initially, and then his form softened a bit, the black-furred wolf relaxing his muscles a little and giving in to Luna’s deep, passionate kiss.

The dark hall of the forgotten old temple was cool and quiet, and the only action outside of the two of them was the silent flickering of the torches on either side of the image silently gazing from the wall. Luna's heart hammered. She could hardly believe that she was getting right back to this moment. She had trouble thinking of anything but this for days after the first time, but it was so easy to let it happen again. The few worries that she had about Vhale's intentions, weak as they already were, faded faster with the revelation that he had touched the sealed crystal in the base of the temple. It made perfect sense to Luna now why Vhale had abruptly been useless to the dark one after that. The damaged part of his essence that bound him to the darkness would have been healed, or he'd have died the moment he touched the crystal. No doubt remained in Luna's heart.

"What if we're caught?" Vhale asked with some worry. Not everyone had cause to trust him so much.

"Then it will appear awkward." Luna stated as she pulled Vhale's robes open in front rather roughly. She remembered very well how she had been interrupted the first time. Whoever might be so foolish as to interrupt again would be bound to the wall by their essence and forced to watch the entire thing. Luna looked down in Vhale's bared lap, that twitching dark flesh bouncing against his belly.

"I have no experience with this kind of thing." Vhale stated flatly, seeming to try to make excuses for how shamefully aroused he was in such a short amount of kissing. Luna smiled warmly, actually somewhat enchanted by his near innocence. In all he did, this was the only innocence he had left.

"You will soon." Luna replied.

"You won't regret such things?" Vhale asked, seeming suddenly more concerned about the weight of his actions in the past.

"Not likely." Luna whispered, and slipped a hand around that thick spire of hot flesh. Vhale gave a sudden groan, arching a bit to Luna's touch. She stroked his cock slowly against her own tummy, bare at the midriff in the skirt and short tunic she wore. Vhale was positively shaking in seconds. Luna slowed the motion of her hand, but then moved it to her mouth and licked it a few times to wet it with copious saliva, getting it good and slick and warm, before pushing it back down over the dark wolf's twitching cock. She remained upon his lap, facing him, as she wetly stroked him, slow and even, loving how he tightened up and shook like a leaf.

"Oh Luna, please don't regret this..." his tone was a whimper.

"I promise." Her words were sincere. The wet slick tone of her hand slipping up and down his thickly swollen masculinity remained steady as she pulled his head to her tunic-clad chest, letting him breathe heavily against her cleavage, still completely dressed as she stroked him.

"I'm gonna ruin your clothes, Lunaaaa...." Vhale's tone gained pitch and volume suddenly, making it plain that he was surprised by the rapid onset of his virgin release. His thighs parted a bit, feet braced, and he leaned back a bit, hands on the edge of the padded ledge along the wall where they were sitting. Luna growled out hotly,

"Not a chance, Vhale." And with that, she pushed her hips up and forward, slipping his thick member under her slightly pleated hunter-green skirt which spilled around Vhale's lap. He tensed up heavily with a gasp, and then a surprised shout as Luna's steamy, soaking sex engulfed his thick cock in a single hard downward stroke. He embraced the wolf priestess with a cry, and then shook violently, feet patpatpatting against the stone floor as he utterly failed to hold it back. Vhale called out,

"Ngah! Luna what are you! Haaahh!!" Luna cooed softly, in gentle whispers into Vhale's ear.

"Every bit of it, let it all out, Vhale, you've been holding this way, way too long..." Even as she spoke, she could feel his cock jumping and jerking inside her tightly clutching depths, spraying his heavy, untamed load relentlessly into her grateful channel. She held herself tightly down into his lap so that he could not slip out, forcing him to indulge her in every drop that this new and exotic experience would pull from the young dark male. Vhale struggled with Luna for a little bit as she somewhat forcefully relieved him of his virginity, but finally, his hands came to her hips and he began to guide her up and down in her already slow, even, nursing motion in his lap, and he leaned back again, panting out in pleasure at the feel of her there upon him.

"Can't... believe... we are doing this..." he panted helplessly.

"Stop thinking, Vhale. It's not helping." Luna panted, riding his lap slowly. Vhale finally growled a warm, somewhat feral and needy tone before pulling open Luna's tunic, baring her heavy breasts, and cupping his mouth upon one, a hand rolling that flesh lustfully as the other pulled at the dock of her tail to make her ride his lap a little more heavily. "That's better... there you go, good boy..." she whispered.

"I cannot believe... you let me do that..." Vhale panted dizzily, pulling Luna up and down in his lap. The lean male leaned back, watching her skirted lap rise and fall over his thighs. Each sinking motion took him in deep, a heavenly sensation that he surely was not used to.

"Let you? Oh Vhale, I would have forced you." Luna growled. She pitched her thighs a little harder against his, and he clutched her lower back, pulling at her to encourage that motion. She closed her eyes, satisfied by the fact that, not unusual for Letai males, he had the ability to continue to make love even after a strong climax. Even without much experience, he was very much willing. There was obviously still some sensitivity, but the enjoyment of pleasuring another was so strong that it was easy to work his way through it. His hips rose up sharply to meet her own, heavy strokes,

and in a few moments, passion and eagerness inflamed them. Rather suddenly, Luna found her body hefted up, and her back pushed against the wall. She held Vhale's shoulders and leaned back, puffing hot breaths with each solid impact of his body to hers as he began to fuck her with the eagerness her steamy loins truly longed for.

"Hope.. I'm not.. hurting..." Vhale tried to comfort the priestess, but she bit his ear sharply.

"Harder, Vhale, don't hold back. You've needed this a long time. It's yours..." She gave a grunt as he pinned her tighter to the wall and his hips slapped rapidly, that thick dark cock pulling at her clutching inner flesh with its wet, desperate pistoning. The priestess felt her body sink into that familiar sensation of physical need, utter willingness. She was not used to being picked up and so eagerly taken. It's something she would have expected from Lyat, but not the somewhat lean and harmless-looking Vhale. He seemed to have suffered his frustrations far too long, especially as he was well aware of how much fun the others tended to have.

"Nnmmp... Ahah... Luna, this is..." Luna bit him again, not wanting him to try to think to talk, she was enjoying the animal in him, and the animal in her. She held his shoulders tight as her back was forced against the wall, keeping her legs looped around his waist as her wet sex took the beating that his most eager thrusting could deliver. She tightened up. There were taboo things that she had done through her life, but this by far took the cake, and the priestess muffled her own scream into Vhale's shoulder as she exploded around him, soaking his lap as his feet braced against the threadbare old carpet. Vhale shook a bit as well as he launched copious volleys of his deeply delivered seed all over Alps' mother's cervix. She buckled against the former enemy and bit him savagely, shaking hard as her climax intensified from the feeling of his seed blasting her depths so intentionally this time.

Vhale's legs gave out and Luna barked out in surprise as they both slid down the wall, bounced off the seating ledge, and then crumpled a little jarringly, painfully onto the floor. The priestess did not have long to complain about the treatment, however, before she was rolled onto her back, her breasts bouncing as Vhale took her hands up above her head and started ferally screwing her on the floor in front of the painting of her centuries-departed lover. She braced her feet against the floor, squeaking loudly with those impacts of his hips, that thick cock not softening in the least even as those last rivulets of his seed were spent into her somewhat foaming sex. She cupped both moons of his rump as he grunted, tail tucked a bit in the force of his determined thrusting as his chest pushed against the lady's own.

"Yes, yes keep going, Vhale! That's it, get it all out..." He bit Luna this time, making her bark out intensely. She arched her back, stifling her own sinking moan as her sex clamped tight around him again. He growled darkly through the intense sensations of pounding Luna well past his climax, but it was finally his back and legs that seemed to give up from the sheer burning exertion. Luna seemed to realize immediately that it was simply his muscles giving out, and she rolled him hard,

slamming him back down to the carpet as she rode him as if on the back of a wild slink, her body rising and falling hard, and both her hands were on his chest for stability.

Vhale put his hands on Luna's backside, pulling her down upon him with each heavy stroke she made, letting her feel each hard pulse of that needy cock as she drove herself faster upon him. She could not even make herself think of someone catching them, loud as they were. Her back hurt from the fall a bit ago, her knees her from grinding them into the carpet in that moment, and her chest burned from the panting, and she could not stop. She gripped Vhale's shoulders and felt him jerking and twitching under her, suddenly pushed over the edge into climax again, and she pushed herself down over him, crying hot and hard into his shoulder as her wetness spilled over his lap, mixed with the foamy remnant of his previous two climaxes.

Finally, Vhale groaned as if agonized as her hips stirred a little longer, and he pulled Luna off to the side, letting her flump onto the carpet beside him and rolling her back onto her back, hips pushed tight to hers, and letting him rest, finally. Vhale then grunted loudly.

"Shit." Luna looked up and saw him looking away. She looked in that direction. There, holding Bone low as if just casually walking around with it, was Reika. She watched the pair with narrow eyes. She was adorned in her normal short leather skirt and wrap-around leather top. Like Vhale had been a half hour before, Reika was pristine, having bathed carefully for the event the next day. Vhale gritted his teeth in surprise.

"Uhh..." Luna felt bad for him, knowing that he was unnerved by the particularly dangerous and unpredictable hyena.

"Reika, this is ... this is complicated." Luna panted. Of all the ones to catch them, she was the one Luna felt would understand the least. The priestess could not catch her breath; her heart was hammering so hard. Reika answered slowly and calmly.

"You two is ... crazy." She nodded at that. Luna looked blankly at the hyena. Vhale and the priestess appeared crazy to the hyena. Somehow that really gave her pause, even as she felt the wolf-cock still twitching inside her. Reika approached, and even that thick spire of flesh stilled instantly. Reika moved close, leaning down, and she put the handle of Bone under Vhale's chin, lifting his head.

"I... I..." The black wolf stumbled on what to say to prevent his skull from getting cracked if that was what was coming.

"Former naughty Vhale is good to Luna always now. *Always*." She reiterated, sliding Bone against his throat and up along his muzzle. Vhale winced a bit, shaking slightly and then nodded quickly. Reika leaned down and kissed the bridge of Luna's

nose, resting Bone on Vhale's shoulder, and then getting up and unceremoniously trotting off. Luna exhaled heavily, dropping her head back.

"Whoo... That went better than I thought it would. Secret's out now though, not even a minute old. I think I should have liked having a secret romance with you, Vhale." She teased. She looked up and saw a look of utter horror on her unexpected lover's face. She looked around and saw no one else. "What's wrong?" she asked with concern.

"It was wet." Vhale whined. "The bone was **wet**."

Alps and Nita were shown around the temple a bit before they were shown a bedroom where they could stay. Luna and Mytan had cleaned a room just for them. Alps felt that the bed had been unnecessarily huge, but the fabrics and the bedding itself had stayed together remarkably well for it being seven hundred years old. It made Nidaja question that it had even been there that long. Perhaps a hundred years or so before, someone had tried to repurpose the temple but later left because of the unusual nature of the woodlands around the place. Still, it was very welcoming and cozy for the pair, and even the thought of lovemaking was not enough to keep them awake. Besides, it was decided that they would do better to save that energy for the following night. So they slept.

Nidaja was having a less easy time of getting to sleep as she explored the temple. It was a truly massive temple and despite the hour growing late and the drafts cutting through the corridor keeping her uncomfortably chilled, the general could not help but explore. Fortunately, she did not have to go alone. Lyat happily offered to explore with her. He wished to learn as much about the place as he could for his ever-growing report for his empress. It was this subject they spoke of as they arrived outside in the courtyard for the sixth time, being deposited out another exit they had wandered to. There were lots of ways in and out to deal with crowds it seemed. Nidaja got the feeling that this place had been a serious social hub at one time.

"When this is all over, do you think the empress will know before you tell her?" the general asked, speaking of Lyat's now likely very noticeably pregnant ruler. The large hyena male sat down with his hip against Nidaja's, happy to stay close and share her warmth. He was not a cold-weather kind of guy. He answered in his calm, low voice.

"Is maybe likely she finds out from spies before we get back, as Uruk stop working in the mines, and hyena there break them to bits, she will know. She will know before Misty is told, I guess." He nodded to that. The Asuna had not originally planned for things to move so swiftly with their new alliance with the Amani empire, but Nidaja was fast to praise the fact that the Asuna had made the trip survivable. The fighting

they had seen so far would have been the end of them without Lyat's heavy blade and Reika's rapid brutal attacking. Nidaja put her hand in Lyat's and looked into his eyes with a smile.

"Are you looking forward to going home? What waits for you there?" she asked. She had spoken a great deal about all that she did for the Amani empire but asked quite little about Lyat. The hyena fighter looked down into her eyes and touched noses with her.

"Lyat's duties are what awaits. Family is not close to Lyat as he is close to his sister, who family is shunning. Her nature reminds families of war of the past. Lyat stays by her side. It is why Rios is nice with Lyat." Nidaja looked at her feet.

"You and Rios are close?" she asked.

"Yes. Very close friends." He nodded.

"Intimate?" she asked.

"When we can." He offered.

"Will she take you as her mate when you return?" the general asked, feeling somewhat sullen suddenly. She had not given much thought to it, but when all was done, and peace returned, what purpose would Lyat have to leave his home again, especially if an empress who loved him was waiting.

"Nidaja is not wanting Lyat to go?" he asked with an uncanny sense of what the general was feeling. Nidaja flinched a bit on the fast uptake. Alps was usually a little less blunt. She liked the direct approach better, and that directness had a lot to do with how close she had started feeling to Lyat, as frowned upon as her closeness might have been. The weight of the things they were doing for both kingdoms made the emerald general feel a lot less stress about that taboo. Who would dare deny them this small thing they wanted after all they had done. Or was it just what she wanted? She suddenly felt her youth upon her, and very silly.

"I've no right. I am sorry for stating such. I have enjoyed your company a great deal. I shall be very sorry to see you go." She tried to say it as professionally as she knew how. Yes, they shared a bond on the battlefield, but this was a symbol of the unity they wanted for their people, which might not happen if they did not make it happen in their own countries.

"I would be given leave to return, I am sure." Lyat stated.

"I would enjoy a visit from you." Nidaja admitted.

“No, Lyat means to come to stay. To work with the Letai and the Amani. Someone is needing to.” He nodded. Nidaja felt her feet go numb. He was offering to come back to stay with her?

“I cannot ask this of you.” She stated selflessly and very much hating selflessness right then.

“Can I ask it of you?” Lyat murmured softly.

“What?” Nidaja asked.

“Can Nidaja come to Puranassa and stay with Lyat then?” The general was surprised that he could even ask the question.

“I’m a general, Lyat. I will be needed here.” She looked at his hopeful face.

“Even with no war?” he asked. That struck Nidaja. She had not really thought much about what she would do if they actually defeated the dark avatar. While they would be ruining most of his army in one move if all worked, he would still be alive. However, he would lack the services of the Asuna to make more soldiers and would likely be increasingly pushed into a corner until they could find a way to crush him or make him surrender at last.

“Even without war, there is the general security of our nation. There are evils within our own nation. You know that already from the Sons of Sorrow.” She stated sadly.

“Then you should let Lyat stay to help defend.” Nidaja widened her eyes again, her heart hammering. Was he really asking this? Was he really intending to stay by her side? She had not allowed herself to seriously think of this.

“Would your Rios not be cross with you if you should desire instead to settle in Amani?” This she was worried about most of all.

“Empress is having entire nation of Asuna who is belonging just to her. Nidaja is only having the one.” The way Lyat said it, Nidaja thought, might not have been how he meant it, since the language was still a little difficult for him at times, but what she got from it was everything she was afraid to admit that she wanted. She pushed Lyat back and kissed him deeply, her tongue pushing into his mouth ardently, her hands clasping behind his shoulders as her tail wagged furiously back and forth. What could she have said to that? Could she have asked one more time if that was what he meant? She did not care. She wanted that moment to last. The light of the endless stars visible in the night sky over a small island on a large lake, cold air whipping around them, Nidaja felt warmth that she had not thought to allow herself, and a sense of hope and determination renewed beyond what Alps alone had already made her feel. Yes, she would always have that love she had for Alps, and she suspected that Lyat enjoyed that

she had that love for him, but if Nita and Alps were to have a family and that rightfully took his focus, Nidaja would perhaps have had to take a step back and watch from amid her duties. This was a future she had not considered for herself. Sure, it was likely not perfect because there would be some dissent about it, but it was not something that could discourage her. Lyat smiled that broad, slightly dopey and kind smile to his emerald lupine lover.

"I will be patient for your return then, Lyat." She whispered to him.

"This is a yes then? You welcome Lyat back, and he stays for defending the Amani, and the castle?" Nidaja nodded, tears in her eyes.

"Reika will be okay with this?" Nidaja asked. It was Reika's voice which answered.

"You is not getting between Reika and her brother." Nidaja's blood ran cold. The general looked up and saw the smaller female hyena perched up on a tree a short distance away. Had she heard the whole thing? "Reika is okay sleeping on left side, and Nidaja has right side. Bone sleeps on right side too though." Lyat shrugged meekly. No, it would not be perfect, but Nidaja had kind of grown to like Reika, and she had improved in her manic behavior a bit with the realization that folks now believed she could talk to Bone who she now clutched in her hand.

"You should be sleeping already, Reika. Are you too excited?" Lyat asked warmly. He appeared to be feeling as happy as Nidaja did and that made her feel better.

"Reika was sleeping, but Priestess and black wolf Reika is not allowed to kill is being too loud with each other." She stated this pretty blandly.

"Wait, what?" Nidaja asked in a flat tone.

"Reika, you is talking about Priestess Luna and Vhale?" The larger hyena stood with concern, as did Nidaja.

"Were they fighting?" the general asked.

"No, they was fucking." Reika's words were terrifically crude and base. Nidaja sat back down with a thump.

"You... You may not have seen that right." Nidaja stated. That made the least sense of anything she'd ever heard.

"Maybe." Reika stated, carefully touching up the markings on Bone's face as she swung her feet back and forth where she was perched in the tree.

“Maybe?” Lyat asked. Reika nodded and spoke again.

“Maybe is just that Vhale’s cock is getting somehow stuck in the priestess and they is struggling for half an hour to get it out, but then they gave up and hugged for a while instead.” Lyat looked blankly at his sister, cupping his charcoal muzzle. Nidaja put a hand on her head.

“Oh my...”

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 21

There was darkness all around Alps. He was drifting again in the by now familiar blackness and he felt an immediate thrill of fear course through him. Had he been Shadowfallen again? He recalled then that when he was genuinely Shadowfallen he had trouble feeling much of anything. That was not how a Shadowfall was supposed to work, it just did not affect him the way it seemed most others. He'd become immune. He shook his head a little and willed his surroundings, but they did not change as they had in the Shadowfall, and while he felt motion, he was standing on something. What was this place he was in? Instead of willing his motion which was not working, he merely took off his cloak carefully. His little wings glowed brightly and illuminated the world around him incredibly well. He could see that he was on a gravel-covered castle courtyard of some kind but the castle was broken and in ruins behind him and chunks were tumbling and floating around as if stuck by some kind of magical field. It was hard to tell if the entire courtyard was floating just by sight but the sensation of slight motion made it obvious that it was.

"Hello?" he called out, his voice sounding normal, but there was little for it to echo on here, as there seemed almost nothing outside this single location.

"Do you recognize it?" a familiar voice asked. Of course. He turned, facing Ellis who had arrived noiselessly behind him as always.

"Can we give these mysteries a rest just for tonight, fox?" he asked.

She canted her head slightly to the side, regarding him. "You know my name." She leaned in closer, eyes narrow and fixed on the former slave. "And I'm not the only fox here."

"Is this revelation amusing to you?" Alps stated.

"It was no revelation at all." Ellis said as she walked noiselessly over to him. She stood there dressed in the same black and white robe that she always seemed to wear.

"You cannot tell me that you knew." He knew the moment he said it that she had known. Of course she had known. She seemed to have a way of knowing everything. It was yet another truth that she just didn't care to share with him.

"Don't be cross, I come with reassurance, not riddles." She narrowed her eyes, seeming a bit indignant. Alps widened his own eyes at that. This was a little unusual for her. He leaned back against a partially broken stone pillar that held up... something long ago and he crossed his arms expectantly. She resumed, content that he did not intend to interrupt her it seemed. "You were right to suspect that you are a weapon, this means that you have come to accept that you have a strength to you." Alps shook his head immediately.

"I'm not a weapon. My mother, Vhale, Nita... none of them see me like that." He believed them and he was not going to let Ellis shake his resolve.

"Oh they do see you as a weapon. That doesn't mean they care for you any less." Ellis crossed her arms as well, looking up at the white wolf who, adorned in his usual uniform, looked back confidently.

He shook his head. "I suspected it, yes. I could almost see myself as a child being honed into some kind of tool to slay Mannus, and that poisoned my heart terribly. I'm no sword. I am past that. I was foolish to suspect it" He smiled to Ellis.

"I believe that you have no idea what a real weapon is." Ellis answered, her tone becoming sharp.

"Together, my friends and I are strong enough to accomplish this task. I believe we can do this and me being ruthless is not needed to that end." Alps growled, knowing that Ellis was still harping on the fact that he had told her not to kill for him.

"Are you? The power of belief alone will see you through, then? A weapon is not about how much blood it spills, but it must still one day strike to accomplish its purpose." Ellis circled him.

"I know that a day may come where I have to, but I do not intend to do so recklessly as you. I've accomplished so much without a mountain of corpses behind me already." The wolf did not hold back.

"Alps, do you think Rios left anything to chance when you vanished from her empire?" Ellis asked. The former slave blinked at that. What an odd question to ask.

"Left to chance?" he asked.

"Not all Asuna were happy with you having been allowed to come into her city, and then to just mysteriously leave. What do you think happened when they made their move to inform the Asuna's dark master about the empress' unusual behavior?" Her tone was cold. Alps could almost feel the chill of it.

"Her subjects are loyal." He stated. Ellis narrowed her silver eyes.

"Her subjects are crushed with fear and self-loathing and know only one true master. Many are genuinely true to her, but she knew full well which ones weren't. I will say that those few will never be a threat to her child. She did not hesitate. "These are the actions of a mother and a leader. Do you begrudge Rios this action? Do you hate her now for having spilled the blood of her own to protect the future you fight for?" Alps did not feel well rather suddenly. Was Ellis just talking? Why would she, about something like this?

"Her actions were to prevent the deaths of possibly thousands of Asuna if the city were attacked." He claimed. "You just kill indiscriminately anyone who gets in the way." He expected Ellis to be angry at that. She did not change her expression, which actually unnerved Alps more.

"You make it seem as if I kill the innocent." She spoke very coldly.

"I don't think you exactly take a tally of who's got blood on them before heads start dropping off." Alps growled.

"Aris..." The wolf seized up a little, feeling as if his heart were gripped in the fox's hand when she spoke his real name. Her voice even sounded different, but somehow familiar at the same time. "It will give you no comfort to know that I think with great care about every life that I end, I do not merely scatter their essence like ashes to the wind. You have seen me kill but you do not realize that my methods are deliberate and calculated. It is easy for me but that does not make it trivial. Aris, when I kill I claim those lives. In each final heartbeat, each last slow breath for which I am often the only witness, every harrowing life-long tale that fades into dream in my passing, I am fully and completely aware. I kill because I know the cost of what should happen if I do not. It is a price that I have as yet spared you from paying but if you follow this path it is not something you can avoid forever." As she spoke in that icy, knowing tone, her narrow eyes never left him, their seemingly blind silver fixed as if upon his aching and fearful heart.

Alps could not move. He could not remember, in all the horrifying moments of his life he had felt more afraid. To know those who would kill for glory, for riches, for honor or their own lives was part of existing in the world, there was no way around it, but that never prepared him for how it felt to meet someone who was a genuine killer. She leaned in close to the wolf, her breath warm in his ear despite how impossibly cold her presence felt.

"Do you begin to understand me now?" Alps had to steel his courage even to speak his wavering answer.

"I...I will not have you killing for me." He wanted to make it clear that it was still his wish.

“Young lover...” her voice did not change. “What if I do?” Her mouth actually touched the rim of his ear, making him feel utterly electrical. His hands hurt from the adrenalin. Was this really one of her dreams? “Will you kill me? Take up the sword and avenge those who would see you buried and your cause fall to ruin? Do you have the skill or conviction to face me?”

She circled around to his other side and moved back a bit, crossing her arms in front of her again. “What of Enna, then? Suppose I had let her live. Think of all the people who’d have died slaving away in the mines for the materials used to make more Uruk. Think of those who’d have died at the hands of that unknown number of Uruk produced. One life taken to save many, including yours. You look me in the eyes and tell me that killing her was wrong.” She said coldly. “The reason you don’t have a pile of corpses in your wake is because they’re all stacked up behind me instead. And if not me, then Nidaja or Nita or Vhale. Your precious queen. Your sweet, gentle mother. The father you never knew. The only one unwilling to do what must be done ... is you.”

Alps gritted his teeth. He had begun to despise being lectured by Ellis as she spoke from a position of apparent authority and the blood on her hands made it plain to Alps that she could cause more darkness in her actions than he could ever hope to repair with his. What good was freeing the world from the threat of the Uruk if the body count in doing so resulted in a civil war where everyone was the enemy? He looked up to Ellis again and stepped forward.

“You know my feelings. I won’t discuss it again. I am sure you know I cannot stop you, I’ve seen what you can do, but I won’t thank you for the graves we’ve had to dig. They were not yours to fill. Enna, and others like her, need to face justice by the law of the land, not by the judgment of an unloving fox.” He refused to show her the fear that she seemed to want him to feel. She seemed surprised by his words, and turned away a moment.

“You find me to be unloving?” she asked.

“How else would you have me see you?” the wolf hybrid growled.

“You know far less than you boast, Aris. Love can sometimes prevent a war, but it will not win one.” She spoke softly. Alps stepped forward again, and placed a hand on her shoulder. He regretted his wording. He did not mean to cast that kind of stone. Just because he did not know Ellis’ heart didn’t mean she didn’t have one. The world she came from, the world of a losing war with the dark one was where she came from. She was a product of his evil not so different as Vhale. He could forgive her if she would understand that so much death would soon be unneeded. She put one of her hands upon his. He found it to be surprisingly warm and soft.

“This is just a dream. I can’t hurt you. You have nothing to hide.” He stated. She turned to face him again, still holding his hand. She took it in both of hers, her eyes gazing up at him, still narrow, but her expression was just impossible to read.

“Aris.” She spoke very softly, and for a moment, he felt perhaps they connected a little more warmly than he had before. This was a very good sign. She moved his hand to her nose. Alps blushed a little as her eyes closed. What was she doing, surely she would not suddenly be so tender. Her mouth parted and then closed around his hand. Searing pain raced up his arm. He tried to pull away but her grip on his arm was absolutely rock solid.

“What the hell!” He growled, pulling back unsuccessfully. He finally felt her let go he snatched his hand back. She had not bitten too deeply – it was just enough for it to have begun to bleed, but it hurt a lot. He backed away.

“Do you still think you can’t hurt someone in a dream?” Alps shook his hand, spitting blood about. He was surprised, but then shook his head.

“It’s a dream you control, of course you can hurt *me*, or make me think I’m hurt, I meant I could not hurt you, and I would not have, though I’m considering it now!” he barked. His blood positively boiled. How could she do that when he was doing his best to show her the kindness he thought she really needed?

“Are you ready to try?” Ellis asked, stepping forward. “I’ll let you have the first hit free.” She held her hands out to make it appear she would not defend herself. Alps trembled a little in rage. Just once. Just once to knock the smug unfeeling look off her face. He stepped closer to her as well, nose to nose with her.

“You think I cannot do it?” he asked.

“I think you will not.” Her breath was sweet. Alps wrapped his fingers tight around the crossed fabric of Ellis’ robes, near her neck and pulled her up a little. She did not try to stop him. She was so light, he thought. How could someone so dangerous seem so light? He drew his hand back, closing it. She was a killer. She did not need a light touch. It was a dream. It was okay, she wanted this. He felt even more angry about how much he wanted this too. She was testing his resolve. He could do it.

Alps did not let himself think another moment. He half-turned, drew his arm back as if he might walk away, and then spun around and put all the momentum of his entire body into his swing, fist balled up tight. He could not help how furious he was at everything. It was not even just the fox, it was all the people who kept secrets, all the people who toiled against their own interests, the blood that would have to be spilled because of cowardice and greed by hands who never wanted to harm anyone, and here this fox was willing to say that he was made just for that and he should just do it. It was all he could take and lashing out was the only thing left for him with that constant taunting Ellis seemed able to give.

To the white wolf’s shocked disbelief, he felt a jolt in his arm as his hand caught the firm, soft-fur-lined cheek of the lady vulpine. His heart fell through his feet. He had

no doubt in his mind that she would not even be there when he threw that punch, but as promised, she left herself wide open. Her head jerked to the side as she took the punch, the force of the blow turning her almost fully away from him. The hardest punch Alps thought he could throw because he was sure she would not even be there, and she just let it land. Alps shook quietly, unable to believe what he'd done, unable to look at the person he had just hit in anger, and fighting with himself about just how to feel about it. An eternity seemed to pass after that impact where he could not look at Ellis, his heart raced, and he felt the intense satisfaction spreading through his body that he's actually landed a punch, even if it was given. He did not back down. He'd not been afraid.

"Seems like you have it in you after all." Ellis stated in a slow, even and emotionless tone. She did not seem angry. Was that really what Ellis had wanted? She continued. "How do you feel now, did you enjoy that?" He finally looked up at the fox, who stood there with that same look of calm resolve, looking off into the dark distance. Alps felt like he should be apologizing, he didn't think he could actually hit her, he was sure she'd have vanished, but he could not lie. Not here. Not to her.

"Fuck yeah." Alps growled without thinking it over any further. "...Like the first time." He shook his hand a little, finding that it stung a bit and not just from the bite, but he felt far less stress. He was troubled by that. He backed up a bit more, expecting he was about to get a beating, but he was willing to throw that punch, so he knew he'd deserve it. It was just a dream. How bad could it be? He looked at his lightly bleeding hand.

"It seems at some point you forgot how to throw a proper punch." The fox stated instructively as she turned around to face him, grinning enough that Alps could see her perfect teeth. If she were injured, she was very good at hiding it. "There is strength enough behind it, but you lack technique. If you had not forgotten, you might have grown up very differently." Alps growled at that. He was not going to let her berate him even after that. If he landed one, he could land another.

"Shut up. Slaves get buried for striking their mistress. There's no justification for it." He crossed his arms, stepping up closer to Ellis. The fact that she didn't understand the rules did not make him wrong for having been tortured the way he'd been.

"According to who?" asked Ellis, suddenly nose to nose again with Alps. He recoiled again, gritting his teeth. "Who told you that law?" Her tone was very sharp. Alps' heart sank a little. He hated being proven wrong, or worse yet, foolish, but he answered.

"Chana did. And I was a child, who else would I have to believe?" he asked.

"Did you like it?" Ellis put her hand on Alps' chest. "Did it feel like love...?" She pushed him back against the towering broken column. "Did you feel cherished and adored as a little innocent whelp having a hot poker pushed under his tail for practically

no reason at all?" Alps blood utterly ignited. How could she talk about something like that? "Did you feel like that was *right*? You knew it was wrong Alps. You knew every time she hurt you that it was wrong." The former slave's heart hammered, his stomach in knots. He screamed in his head for Ellis to shut up, to stop talking, to be quiet but no words came out. He felt tears welling up. How weak he would seem to her if he cried, but he wasn't sad. He felt a complete loss of control. Why did it even matter to him what she thought? However, she was right; he knew how bad he felt about each time he was unduly punished, or disciplined well beyond what was called for. He admitted that freely to himself, but he managed to take it all and come out a winner by his standards. Why did it hurt so much to hear Ellis say this now? She pulled Alps away from one column and spun him to the side, slamming his back against another, one-handed. "You knew it and you let it happen. She could have killed you and you'd have let her. And for what? What good did it do you to be weak for half your life in this place?" Finally, Alps shouted back at Ellis into her face, spitting a bit as he barked out.

"Fine! I hated it! You have to *know* I did, but I couldn't do a thing! I was a child! She was bigger, stronger, and even the folks at the orphanage told me that my mistress was my legal obligation once I was purchased! I had no idea where it ended! I was a *kid*!" How could Ellis be so blind to what his life had been when she seemed to know every detail of what he went through? This conversation alone was as barbaric as any punishment Chana dished out. Why did it all hurt so much coming from the fox? Alps didn't give a shit what Ellis thought, did he?

"You hated it. You wanted to stop it, but you thought you could not?" Ellis' voice was smooth and casual. "Preposterous. You did not suddenly become Letai, you've been one since you were born. I want you to consider this very seriously." Ellis pushed Alps tightly against the column with one hand still on his chest, making him wheeze a bit. How could she have that much force when she weighed so little? She spoke softly, her voice sounding gentle again. "You are the son of a Letai life priestess and draw naturally more essence than you use. You heal faster and better than a normal Amanian child because of your link to the flow of essence. *A lot* better. You could take much more punishment than a regular child would hope to survive. Think about what that *means* Aris." Alps' heart went from rage at Ellis, to complete horror at a thought that he was rather shocked he never once considered even after learning about his heritage.

"If I had not been Letai..." He slowed his breathing, feeling sick.

"How old were you the first time you needed days to recover from one of her punishments, Aris?" asked Ellis icily.

"A little Amanian kid would have died..." Alps felt numb for that brief moment of realization. If he had been normal, he'd never have met Nita and Nidaja. He'd never have known Uri and Misha and Misty. Chana would have taken him away from them and not even cared. Chana, who had had defended from Nidaja and tried to excuse even to Ellis could have murdered a child.

“Sometimes you have to fight Alps. You don’t want to, and that’s respectable – you don’t have to enjoy it, but there are those out there who need to be fought and those out there who need you to fight for them, and as strong and righteous as you think your friends may be, sometimes... justice gets there too late for the person who needs it the most.” Alps’ blood ran cold. This was a monumental truth. He would never have fought Chana, but he needed someone to. Ellis darkened her tone again. “You did not have to live through that, Aris. You were a coward. You *are* a coward. And now your friends have to see the scars and know that as much as they need you, you will ultimately *fail* them. Your new wife, your friends, your lovers, your family, all of them will suffer because you let yourself become completely useless in the face of your fear and inaction, Aris.” The lean, black and silver fox lifted Alps up in one hand almost effortlessly and actually *threw* him. He felt the lurch as if it was not even remotely a dream and his back thumped into a broken part of a wall and he fell over the back of it. As he looked up, dazed by this, his back stinging from the impact, he looked up to see Ellis perched on the wall neat and casual, arms crossed. Alps struggled to his feet, only to get a foot planted in his chest with a push that sent him stumbling backward. The white wolf regained his balance and stood up, a hand on his chest. He coughed a bit and barked out,

“Do you think I could do what I’m doing now if I were a coward? Do you think I could fight the Uruk and defend my friends and my world if I were a coward?!” Alps barked at Ellis.

“I’ve seen you fight, you flailing whelp!” shouted Ellis, giving Alps a very good impression of what her genuine anger looked like. She strode to him and gestured wildly with her hands. “It’s like watching a panicked child slap-fight a sibling! You know better than that! You act brave but you are terrified to stupidity. It’s the Uruk who should be afraid of you! You are a complete waste!” Alps backed up a bit. He’d not seen Ellis so genuinely mad before, and he knew what she was capable of. She got closer. Alps gritted his teeth. He was not a coward, he’d shown her that before, and if he had to show her again, he would. He tightened his resolve and took another swing at her.

“Stop!” Alps shouted as he delivered that punch. This one did not connect. She caught his wrist easily and her grip was like iron.

“I only said you get one!” she barked, raising her foot to his chest again and kicking him backward, sending him sprawling in the dirt and rocks with a sliding crunch. It took him a moment to get back to his feet, as he was a bit more stunned by that kick. Alps growled. If she wanted a genuine fight, fine. It was a dream, he could dream about pulling those stupid fox ears all night if he had to. He let his body take over a bit and just raced to meet her, taking a good couple of swings at her. She seemed to not actually be anywhere he was punching. He wished he had Ressaia, at least he’d have some reach.

“Hold still, since my punches barely seem to faze you! I want to slap your little black fox nose so hard it lands in Misty’s dream!” He moved faster, willing himself much

as he did in the Shadowfall. That was not much different from a dream. He felt himself getting stronger as he fought, his will for this increasing. It felt like it was not his anger that fuelled him, but just his will to fight, as if having no will for it was all that had held him back before.

"What are you trying to hit me with, Aris?" barked Ellis. "Where are you even swinging? You are better than that!" She seemed very frustrated and angry. Was this somehow what she really wanted? He stepped back a little and panted. How was he winded in a dream? That did not make any sense, unless his mind itself was just tired.

"What do you want from me? I don't know your tricks!" he barked.

"Then you use the tricks you do know! What use is a sword that is so afraid of its actions that it cannot even be drawn from its sheath?!" There was a dark blur which Alps assumed was actually Ellis' hand striking him, and he flipped backward from the force of it. He got up onto all fours. That stung, but not as much as he thought it would. Perhaps he was getting the hang of dream fighting. He grinned at that thought. He was fighting Ellis. Maybe he was losing, but he was fighting her. What was he feeling? Every time he'd actually been in a fight he was terrified, but that was not what he was feeling now, even though the one he was fighting was perhaps the most terrifying fighter he'd witnessed. He stepped side to side and tried to jab at Ellis. Her foot caught him in the temple and then he was on the ground again. The attack hadn't worked, but her reprisal hurt less than expected. He hopped back up, panting. He felt exhilarated in a way that he knew he should not, but it's how he felt all the same.

"Now how does it feel, Aris?" Ellis asked, her voice much quieter than before.

"What difference does it make, I'm fighting aren't I?" he shouted, jumping forward to just use his body to slam into Ellis. She simply stepped to the side and pushed her fist into his stomach. Alps landed and fell to his hands and knees, coughing, but he pulled himself back to his feet a moment after. Without knowing it his feet slid into a more stable positioning, inching closer to the fox before throwing his weight into a kick that he somehow felt that he *knew*. He spun his body quickly and brought his foot around to strike her in the neck, and perhaps he might have, but she simply seemed to blink away. He'd seen times where she seemed to just be there when he turned around, or gone when he looked up, but he'd never seen her actually vanish. She was controlling the dream. He looked back to the broken wall to find her standing on it again. He pitched a rock at her and she caught it as though Alps had just thrown the stone right into her hand. The fox hopped down, her tail waving silkily side to side.

"You are fighting yes, and you are losing terribly. It's shameful. But how do you feel, even so?" She seemed much calmer now. Alps wiped his chin, finding that he was drooling a bit from panting.

"I... Fine, I'll say it. I feel ... great. I feel awesome. Is that what you are waiting on? Proof that I am enjoying this?" He crossed his arms.

"Do you feel like a weapon?" Ellis asked. Alps narrowed his eyes. That was an odd question.

"No, I don't." Ellis raised an eyebrow, prompting him to say more. To think about it. He looked down, thinking hard. How did he feel? "I feel... I feel like I ... am not ..."

"Afraid." Ellis whispered, suddenly right by Alps' ear.

"Yes. Like I'm not afraid, like every other time I've fought you, I've never been..." His eyes widened suddenly, and he felt a shock through his whole body in that moment of realization. A thousand ghosted images barely within the view of his memory flickered as if on a dark mountainside and illuminated by a single flash of lightning. It felt as if he were just dropped through all of space as a sheer sense of knowing struck him, and yet the knowledge seemed impossible.

Alps sat bolt upright, panting still, the room dark. He scrambled his thoughts, the single dawn of memory still vivid in his mind, unforgotten. He could not forget it. He looked at the peacefully sleeping Nita at his side. He sighed resolutely, trying to calm down. Ellis let him out of the dream. Was that memory all that fight was about? He could not shake the realization that had hit him, but he owed it to his beloved to keep himself calm, and to focus on the moment. He did not want to wake Nita and worry her. Besides, it had been a dream, how much of what he had experienced was even a real experience? He looked down at his hand which he could swear was still stinging and he came to realize his back and ribs felt sore. His heart sank. Two points of red were clearly visible on the back of his hand. That had to have been the most terrifying revelation of his entire evening. Ellis... could harm someone in a dream.

Alps winced a bit at that, holding his hand and carefully getting out of bed. He would want to clean that up well because the last thing he wanted was for Nita to see it and ask questions. She did not need any more stress than what everyone else had already caused and he could handle the fox. He felt a lot more secure in that now, but the emotions he was feeling and the familiarity that was resting in his head were making it so that he was not likely to be able to sleep right away anyway. Alps moved through the temple as silently as he could. In the near darkness it was very difficult to see where he was going and it did not take him long at all to become lost. He felt very silly about that. At least he was able to see somewhat because of his incessantly lightly glowing little feathery wings. He was finding that to be the most useful they had been since he got them.

"Seriously," he said to himself, "I lived here as a kid, you would think some of this would be more familiar." He looked at the decaying walls and broken tile on the floor, worn and weathered and beaten by the years. It was pretty different from how he would have been likely to remember it. He stumbled along until he found some stairs that went down. He shook his head. "No, I definitely did not go below the ground floor." He turned away, but heard a voice from below.

“Hey, come look at this.” He stopped in his tracks.

“Reika?” he asked. It sounded like Reika, but she lacked the Asuna accent that made her speech so broken and sometimes grating to listen to.

“Come on, this is nice, you should see it.” It was definitely the Asuna female’s voice. Alps felt a little strange about it, but it was not much different from everything else that was happening to him on a regular basis these days. He shrugged and sighed. He was not likely to make it back to his bed without someone who had done a little more exploring leading the way. He plodded down the stairs which wound down for quite some time, the walls smooth and seeming a bit less damaged. Then again, it was harder for the kind of weathering seen up above to get down this far. It also felt a little cooler and dryer. The wolf made it to the bottom and found that it was carpeted; his bare feet grateful for the lack of broken tiles and other jagged favors upon the ground. He moved much more silently through the halls. He was able to see in the pale silver moon-like light of his wings well enough. The carpeted halls seemed to stretch forever. There were doors that went off to the sides which were closed and a thin layer of dust upon them suggested they had not been opened in some time.

“Reika? Are you down here?” Alps asked.

“Yes. What’s taking you so long? You are always so slow.” The voice continued to be indistinguishable from the somewhat tomboyish and grating voice of the hyena, it was just that her speech was unbroken and perfect. Alps finally arrived at a very solid-looking metal and wood door at the very end of the hall.

“Well, this is not ominous at all. But, this is a Letai temple, I don’t suspect it’s that much trouble...” The wolf rather confidently moved through the door, beginning to wonder if he had actually really become awake. It would explain how he’d still been injured. If he was sleeping, he could not seem to will himself wake up, that much he verified. As he opened the door and moved to the room beyond, he was dumbstruck. The room within was immense and housed a single large, radiantly glowing crystal. It seemed gold in color, but it was hard to tell if it was the crystal that was gold, or just that the gold gilding through the room reflecting back at the crystal made it seem like that. The walls were the same white stone most of the rest of the temple was made of, but there were bands of silver and gold all around the place, and despite how brightly the crystal was glowing, the ceiling which stretched away terminated only in darkness. It seemed impossibly high. Were the stairs that he had followed really that deep inside the temple? It had to be well below the lake’s water-line. What was this place? He did not see Reika anywhere.

“Are you here?” came the disembodied voice. It still sounded like Reika.

“I don’t see you.” Alps said softly. This was not going in a positive direction. Strangeness seemed never to work out for Alps.

"Look in the crystal, silly." Reika's voice complained. Alps had trouble believing it was her. That was too polite. Still, he moved up to the crystal. It felt pleasantly warm. There was certainly no dark essence that Alps could feel about it. The crystal was about fifteen feet wide and easily sixty feet tall. It was six-sided and seemed clear, if a little refractive. He placed his hands on the warm-feeling crystal and peered inside. He would not have been surprised to find out that Reika had somehow gotten into the crystal. The moment he looked inside he felt a lurch and then blinked as the crystal vanished and he found himself standing in a clearing in the middle of a forest with impossibly tall trees. The moons cast a lot of light and it was very easy to see.

"Of course. Now what?" Alps sighed. He could be hundreds of miles away now. How foolish of him, but he simply was not surprised. He looked at his hand which now was not stinging. It seemed completely healed. That was not a big surprise either. He was having trouble understanding what was real and what was not and felt that this was likely a dream as well. "Reika, you here?" the white lupine asked.

"No, she's not. Sorry to use her voice, but I needed to see you." This was a completely unfamiliar voice. Alps froze. Whoever it was... they were behind him. He swallowed and turned slowly. There was no one there. He looked straight out into the forest. As far as the eye could see, there was no one. This was not exactly a positive development.

"I hope I don't remember this dream. It's really weird." He half-whispered.

"Down here, Aris." The voice, feminine, stated somewhat casually. Alps blinked and then looked down. Standing right in front of him, only inches away but considerably shorter, was a lady fox, more akin to the Lhap islanders that Alps was more familiar with than Ellis' kind. She had bright white fur, however, which made him feel like maybe this was a relative of his father's. He backedpedaled a little, somewhat surprised to see her there instantly when he didn't even see her approach. He looked at length at her, trying to slow his heart. "I had not imagined myself to be so imposing to one such as you." The vulpine female said softly. Alps blushed a little, finding that she was bare, not so much as a ribbon upon her. She was petite, standing not more than four and a half feet tall, if that, and seemed very much the same sort of fox his father was. Her ears were, if possible, even larger, swept back, graceful and beautiful. She wore no jewels or markings; her appearance as pure as fresh-fallen snow. Her eyes were bright violet which made her feel more familial. Her tail was impossibly voluminous, even more than the fox that stood by his mother in the painting. It seemed as long as the rest of her body was tall. This could well be a relative.

"How did you know my name? And why in the world would you have chosen Reika's voice to draw me out here?" he asked, by way of perhaps getting her identity and her intentions. She did not seem a threat, but it was hard to know who was in this stage of his journey.

"I know what's going on in my temple, Aris. I chose the Asuna's voice because she's the one you seemed like you would both believe was bold enough to wander down to the crystal, and you'd be unwilling to ignore." Alps arched an eye-brow. She got that right. He'd not have ignored Reika. She spoke up again. "I know about your plans for tomorrow in the temple. It's very exciting! Are you excited?" Alps felt his worries immediately wane. This was not the kind of questioning an enemy might pursue right away. The chance to talk about something nice was not what he expected, but if that is what she wanted to talk to him about, he was willing. Even though he had trouble ignoring her beauty, he wanted to return to Nita's side as soon as he could, but this fox might be able and willing to help him. He responded with a bit of a smile.

"I'm excited, yes! I'm a little nervous too. I know Nita says things won't change but a lot of stuff is going to change. If we succeed in what we are doing, there will be a lot of attention on the royal family and I know it's going to be a very fast-paced at least for a while." He rubbed the back of his head in much the same fashion as he found himself doing much of the time when talking to his mother. This fox seemed a little like her.

"Do you enjoy your life with Nita right now, Aris?" asked the lady fox.

"Of course! Even with all the hell we've been through, these are the very happiest days of my life. I would not suggest otherwise." He nodded at that, sincerely believing it. He glanced down the vixen's body, inhaling deeply. Was he supposed to be attracted to her, or was her nudity just plain and natural and it would be insulting and crass for him to feel this way? He didn't know a lot about Lhap culture.

"So how is your life going to be that different if things are crazy and changing rapidly, so long as you are together?" asked the very wise-sounding lady. Alps paused. That was the most calming thought he'd been subjected to since Nita suggested that she take him as a life mate. His life had been a roller coaster since he met the queen and he'd never been happier. Even if things continued to be wild and crazy, it would not be any different between them, just around them. There would always be a storm, and it would always have surprises, good and bad, but they had agreed to weather it all together. He felt immediately wonderful.

"I cannot... believe the relief to that concern was so simple." He looked back down to the smiling vixen. "Thank you for that. Why did you want to see me?" He felt he owed her whatever she was seeking after her comforting words.

"I like seeing you. You've grown so tall. Your mother was sure you'd be no taller than Dias." Alps recoiled a little at those words.

"How could you have known my father?" he asked. "Are we... Are we in a Shadowfall?" This did not feel like a Shadowfall, but they would have to be for her to be old enough to know his mother and father or to have seen Alps when he was little.

"No, this is different." The lady said.

"It feels different." Alps explained.

"Does it? How did the Shadowfall feel to you?" she asked. Alps paused again. She knew that a Shadowfall did not work on him? How did she even know he'd been in a Shadowfall at all? This was even more bizarre.

"I guess... they didn't really work on me..." He crossed his arms.

"Initially perhaps, but after a while of dealing with the effect, you should have become immune. It was a very careful and clever seal." The wolf blinked again incredulously.

"A seal? From who?" he asked. Someone made him able to resist the Shadowfall? This was sounding more and more like he was intended for the things he was doing. His heart was sinking again. He wanted to believe his mother. He was not 'made' for all of this. He was doing it of his own volition.

"I did." She answered, cutting off his train of thought. "And before you go fretting about that whole 'am I a weapon' thing, don't. The seal was to make it so that your eventual, unavoidable eternity in the Shadowfall was not suffering. And... your mother had no part in it. She would have been mortified that I thought that the Letai in Amani were going to die out. I did not expect you to gain the ability to actually leave the Shadowfall. It's not from that seal. That's not how it worked. It might have made it so you had the chance to gain the ability, sure, since you were not being terrorized anymore, but you got out on your own. And after you did, I lost track of you completely, which means you left the lifestream. You can imagine my complete shock when I felt you and your mother approaching the temple seven hundred years later. So, yes, Aris. I *had* to see you." The wolf-hybrid wavered slowly side to side. That was a lot to have to digest. Yes, he knew that he escaped the Shadowfall and went into the Nether, which was not exactly in the lifestream, but he was unaware until that moment how he had the ability to do it. The reason he was different from other Letai was because he was not affected by the negative essence of the Shadowfall. Would others with the seal he had have eventually been able to escape? But he didn't escape from the Shadowfall and return home. His escape was supposedly much worse.

"Just... who are you?" Alps asked.

"My name is Luna. Should be familiar enough." Alps nodded. She shared his mother's name. It was a popular name for female Letai because the original High Priestess who arrived in Amani was named...

"Wait, not *the* Luna..." Alps stammered. Surely he was being over-dramatic.

"If by that you mean the one who established the Letai on the eastern continent, then yes, I would be that Luna. But obviously I'm long gone, it's been a very long time." Alps blinked at that.

"So this is just a dream?" the wolf asked.

"No, this is as real as the word real is allowed to suggest." Luna stated, her huge ears perking with some interest. "For what you went through Alps, you seem pretty in the dark about why you were Shadowfallen in the first place." The rather lovely lady fox circled him, seeming to take in his appearance. Despite the fact that he was wearing a simple grey robe tied in the middle, he felt oddly naked in front of her.

"I was told that the Letai were still dangerous if you killed them. I did not know what it meant. Does that mean you are dead? Am I talking to a spirit?" He was surprised to find himself suggesting that and being completely unafraid. Alps was terrified of ghosts as a child.

"Something like that. The stronger your essence is, the longer you can continue to influence those closest to you. In my case, I imprinted my energy in a crystal to make my consciousness last longer. 400 years before your mother was born, if you can believe that. It takes a lot of essence to do it, but it's worth it if really want to continue to help those you love. Also, since the crystal was at an important Letai temple, the essence drawn there was given to me routinely, and this kept me strong. In my case, I keep loving more people. It makes it easy to stay around. These last few centuries have been pretty uneventful, but the forest has gained enough essence to make sure I don't fall into the forever slumber." Alps listened intently. Did his mother even know about the spirit of their ancestor being in the temple? The conversation that she and Vhale had with him earlier came back to him. Was this what they were talking about?

"So this is kind of a dream inside the crystal because that's where you have placed yourself? So it's like a Shadowfall, but with no negativity, just your essence, sheltered? It's like a living dream?" Alps was starting to understand. He could control the entire world within the Shadowfall with his desires. It was likely that Elder Luna could do the same. He remembered some of the history that Vhale gave to him. Vhale found out about this technique perhaps from the library where he studied, and bent it to the perverse weapon it later became. He didn't create the Shadowfall as a concept, just corrupted it into an attack. His ancestor spoke again in her sweet and caring voice, seeming to know when to distract him from his darker thoughts.

"It was not a very easy seal to create within a crystal and took a lot of essence. Essence is good for making illusion, and for seeing into the spirit. Some, if they are strong enough, can even go into the dreams of another. The Val-Rashans were particularly adept at this." Alps felt that was immediately relevant.

"Who were the Val-Rashan?" Alps asked.

"The Val-Rashans are folks that the Letai were very, very polite with." Luna answered cryptically.

"Foxes?" Alps asked.

"Yes. Tall, graceful, lean, quiet ones. You've got one with you, why are you asking me about them?" Alps lowered his ears.

"She does not talk about herself."

"They usually don't." his ancestor stated calmly.

"She's very mysterious." Alps stated. He hoped that would prompt this ancient Luna to provide a little more information. He wanted to find out the meaning of the memories that prickled at the back of his mind that seemed to have lain dormant for so long. She answered courteously.

"Then you are every bit the scholar on the Val-Rashan that I am, Aris. They were not terribly open about their culture, even in my day." No, that was not terribly helpful.

"So you ... just wanted to meet me and make sure it was really me?" Alps was beginning to fret about getting back to his bed and returning to slumber for the very important event to come.

"I wanted to ask you where you went when you left the lifestream, obviously." Alps smiled at that. It was a very honest answer and he appreciated that. She did not hesitate to tell him exactly what she wanted. This was a rather refreshing change to him.

"I think I broke my Shadowfall. I don't know exactly what happened, but out I went." He rubbed the back of his head nervously. He hated not being able to tell her exactly what happened. She seemed very curious about it, and it had to be important. Still, where he went was troubling to everyone he told and he didn't want to give Elder Luna a hard time. He still was not entirely sure this was not all a dream but it felt too vivid.

"I don't think you went right from Shadowfall back to Amani. You have been outside of your Shadowfall for centuries." Elder Luna pointed out. The former slave sighed. He'd have to say it.

"I slipped into the Nether." Alps answered calmly. Surely this great priestess would know about that, maybe more than his mother and Vhale did. Maybe she had some answers about that for him.

"No, that would have killed you. You were a child, Alps, there's dragons, Culier Shadows, and worse in that place." She seemed to study Alps closely, and then,

carefully, she put a hand over his heart and jerked it back, eyes wide. "You aren't kidding. That... is where you went. I can still feel the endless void upon your essence. You really were... there." She seemed a bit fearful. That was not the reaction Alps had hoped for. He got the impression that the Nether was a bad place, but he didn't think it could be that bad. He'd survived it. Almost painfully, another memory prickled in his head.

"Alps... what awaited you when you got into that place?" The curious former great priestess asked a question that was completely appropriate for her to ask given that she was confronted with someone who had actually been there, and in that instant, for the first time, Alps had a solid, real, and unwavering answer.

"Ellis." He said it flatly, and it might not have meant a lot to the priestess, but it meant everything to him. He suspected that she had been in there, but he was never completely sure until that moment. And he was not sure about exactly what her role there had been. The brief and clear memory of skidding on his belly to a halt on what felt like sun-baked gravel. He got up and dusted himself off, turning around and seeing a wavering black mass slowly approaching. It smelled like sulfur and blood and he immediately and instinctively knew he needed to stay away from it. He did not remember his entire attempt to escape, but he recalled a ledge so high up that a ground beneath was not a promised possibility. With nowhere to go, he turned around again to face the death that had been following him for who knew how long, but she was there. Ellis was there between him and it. He did not see what she did, but he remembered a light so bright that the next thing he knew was being carried away from that place in her arms slowly regaining his sight and being scolded for looking right at it.

"Ellis?" Elder Luna asked. Alps supposed he had not said the taller fox's name in the temple itself, and his last conversation with her had been in a dream which may have been just as real as what Alps was experiencing now.

"The Val-Rashan." Alps whispered, still in a daze from the sudden clear accounting of his first moments in the Nether. But it cast a much brighter light on the other memories that were foggy and ethereal in his head after the fight with her before. He remembered fighting Ellis. Even if blurred in his consciousness, it was clear in his heart. They had been in there together for so long and somehow he could not remember until he struck her. He had never struck someone like that before, in a brawl you intend to fight even if it's not about self-defense, but when he fought Ellis he remembered it as if singing a song he knew as a kid and remembering everything as clear as it could be. He'd been in sparring matches with Reika and with Nidaja, but those were not like this.

"You don't remember it." The priestess seemed shocked.

"I am just starting to remember a little. A bit more just now. I know it was her. She stayed with me. She ..." Alps did not know how to feel. Should he be revolted that this seemingly cold-hearted killer had taken care of him for so long? Why did he not

remember her? Why did he not love her? He then folded back his ears. He did love her. It's why he got so upset with her criticism. He shook his head. Elder Luna, as she seemed apt to do when Alps was troubled, soothed him with her sweet and gentle voice.

"I am not helping you at all, am I? You should be relaxing for your ceremony tomorrow." She frowned, the short vulpine circling him again.

"It's alright. I guess you understand that it's been a pretty crazy journey." He remembered her encouraging words and it comforted him again. It might always be crazy, but he would be with the ones he loved. Even after the dark times were over after this journey and the world changed, the one thing that got to stay the same was his closeness with the ones he loved.

"I am starting to see that, yes." Elder Luna stood in front of Alps. "I won't have you exhausted on my account. Let me send you back." She circled Aris again, seeming to really give him a thorough looking over.

"You know I will come back, right?" he asked.

"If you live through this foolish thing you all intend to do." Elder Luna stated.

"Do you think we can do it?" he asked. Having her support in this would mean a lot to him.

"I am less aware of what needs to be done than you are. I only know the very basic concept of what you are trying to do based on discussions between Nidaja and Lyat in the temple. You and your friends have a chance of surviving it, even if not everything is a success. I think it's worth trying. I wish Vhale had visited my temple sooner. I might have been able to stop this." She looked up at Alps, her eyes fixed on his.

"It won't help to shoulder the blame. It's time for happier things, if we can manage them." Alps found it strange that he was comforting someone who was legendary even by the accounts of people who were associated with legends.

"Alps, you spared Vhale. You had no idea that I had purified his heart; all you knew is what he had done when the Nether had consumed him. So little of the real Vhale was there when he cast you into the Shadowfall, and yet, just to torture himself, he refused to let me heal that dark deed. What did you see in him that made you spare him?" Her words seemed crafted in wonder. Was it that unthinkable? He was not around during the war and he was not subjected to, in his memory, those things that the dark one had done.

"I never knew the Vhale of the war." Alps stated. "When I met him in his Shadowfall, I saw someone consumed, not in hatred of others, or darkness, but

sadness and regret. That did not, to me, seem right. I guess killing him would have been easy, and he even felt it would be justified, the essence knows my mother would have done it without a second thought, but looking at it now, it seems she would have lost a friend..." He smiled a bit, feeling even better about his choices. Elder Luna was happy that Vhale had been spared. It was a good choice.

"Friends with your mother? Yes, I could agree there." The lady fox nodded emphatically. "I wanted, before you left, to tell you that You are right to love so strongly, even if you run the risk of falling to ruin by it. Your friends know this is your weakness, but they won't let it destroy you." Alps looked away, thinking back to Ellis.

"Not all of them are happy about having to protect me when I am being too gentle." He shuffled his feet.

"This is something that worries you a great deal, so here is my advice as you return to those you love." Her words were measured and slow to cast importance on what came next.

"Yes?" he asked attentively.

"Trust your friends as they trust you. When you tell them to love, they do. Against their better judgment, Vhale was spared. This, it seemed, set the path for you all to follow. They do not regret listening to you. But you must listen to them. When they tell you its time to fight, do not hesitate. Do not shy away. Lyat and Nidaja both know very well when and how to use force. They will give their lives to protect you from harm, but you will be expected to do the same. Do you understand?" Alps inhaled very deeply, holding his breath a moment. Nidaja and Nita and Lyat and Reika had never asked him to kill someone, to fight to the death, they did not want him too, but Ellis was far, far more direct about the very same thing this sage vulpine priestess was saying. Alps could love and still fight. He would have to. He nodded to the lady fox.

"I will. I promise." He stood straighter. He was not sure what he had to do in order to allow her to send him back. And then he was standing in the crystal chamber, the light of the moon gone and that golden light of the crystal returning. There was no jarring motion, nothing. He was just in a different place. He shook his head slowly. His life was so very complicated and strange. Finally, he remembered that he was not entirely sure how to get back to his bed. He hoped that Nita did not wake up and worry. The wolf hurried from the crystal chamber into the long hallway that headed back to the stairs. As he plodded along quickly, he found himself suddenly anxious at a certain point in the hallway, but that feeling ebbed quickly as he moved. He stopped. He turned back to the point where he felt that anxiousness. He narrowed his eyes and moved back to that area. He stood there for a moment, peering into the shadows. His wings glowed enough to let him see. He then looked up and crossed his arms.

"Found me, did you?" came a voice from behind. This time was not a dream. It was really Ellis. She had followed him down her, perhaps.

“Somehow, yes. I think I understand what that fight was about.” He turned as faced her. She wore white robes this time. He did not recognize them. Did she even carry a pack around? He never saw her with anything like that.

“Do you?” she asked, her tail swaying back and forth liquidly behind her.

“I remember you in the Nether now. I remember you protected me.” He approached the fox who seemed fairly relaxed. This was not a dream, he was sure of it. She did not have any unnatural control here, he felt.

“Is that all you remember? You don’t remember anything more useful?” she asked. Alps flattened his ears. Without being told, he was quite aware of what she meant – of what she wanted from him. He took two quick steps, feeling lighter than usual in his rapid motion. He spun backwards, keeping as good an eye on the fox’s position as possible as he made two very powerful and very fast swings at her. This, perhaps, she would not be able to shrug off so easily. He felt the impacts but could tell it was just her hands blocking his. He advanced, the movements seeming come naturally. This was what she wanted, he was sure. She wanted him to remember fighting her and to prove that he would still do it. He had practiced fighting in a sparring nature with Reika, but he always felt confused and sluggish and awkward. That feeling was gone. Everything felt organic and clean. He shifted his weight, brought one foot up and then the other in a series of kicks that felt familiar, though he didn’t quite know how. He felt like he might have felt if he were a dancer, flowing motions and planned responses. Ellis blocked each attack, but he felt confident in them all the same. The fact occurred to him even as he was fighting that she had to block them.

“Don’t fancy a blow to the head in the real world, Ellis?” he asked, smirking.

“I told you, one. Don’t pretend being willing to fight makes you automatically more able.” She barked.

“Was I able before?” Alps asked. “I was a kid, it must have been pretty easy for you!” He was panting as he threw a few more punches, using the heel of his palm instead of his fists. He seemed to be faster that way. Ellis seemed capable deflecting his blows with ease, like it really was some kind of planned dance routine. Alps’ heart raced. He could not fully comprehend why it felt so right, but he felt good fighting with her.

“You’d be surprised.” Ellis seemed to enjoy the sparring as well as her demeanor didn’t seem as dour as usual. Alps bounced from heel to toes, side to side, changing his direction and position. He tried harder, pushing himself to move faster, but he seemed a prisoner of his body with what he wanted to do in the fight, and what he could expect to work. He called out to the vixen.

“Maybe you should try your hand at attacking, I doubt my opponents would ever be content t-“ Alps took a hard punch across the muzzle, sending him in a half-spin to the left. He jerked back a little, inwardly laughing at himself for being that silly, but he advanced again despite how much it stung. Ellis did not waste time, kicking in graceful combination level to his chest, but he found himself blocking them just in time. They were not gentle attacks and it hurt his arms to block them, but they did not find their intended target. A feeling of pride swelled within him. She spoke again.

“Better, Aris. Better.” Ellis moved in a manner that seemed like a cluster of reeds in the wind and Alps inexplicably got tapped under the chin, making his teeth clack together loudly. He found that if Ellis attacked him she was willing to get closer because she had to reach him, and in the next moment, he used that to his advantage. She moved in to give him another tap, and he made no effort to block it, instead turning with the stinging impact, not much different from anything he dealt with as a child under Chana, and he moved his hand to give a solid back-hand to the fox. She blocked this, and he punched with the other hand as he let the block switch his momentum. She blocked this too, or would have, if he hadn’t jerked his hand back once she committed to the movement and thrust it forward again, planting his palm firmly to the side of Ellis’ muzzle with an audible thump. Everything stopped. Her head tilted back slightly she stared at him out of the corner of her eyes. Alps looked at his hand to the muzzle it was planted against with disbelief.

There was an odd, appreciative look in her eyes. “How beautiful it is when the seed of memory blossoms again into the flower of knowledge.”

“I thought you said I only got one.” He said as a coy, boastful smirk spread across his face.

Before he’d even finished he felt her foot against his chest again and sure enough with a single hard push she sent him sprawling across the hallway. A sharp reminder not to be arrogant around her.

Panting raggedly he picked himself up, glaring at Ellis.

“What do you even fight for?” he huffed. It was hard feeling so capable in what he remembered, at least subconsciously he could do, and still being so bitterly out-matched. She stood still a moment and folded the end of her sleeves over, knowing he was not going to try another attack.

“We have similar goals, I just achieve mine differently.” She spoke rather matter-of-factly. She moved forward again quickly, putting a finger against Alps’ chest. The pressure behind it was enough to hurt his sternum quite a bit. He backed up as she spoke. “And I’ve been fighting to keep *you* alive. You would do well to bear this in mind going forward.” She crossed her arms. Alps leaned back against the wall and panted heavily.

"I ... may have been wrong to criticize you, Ellis." Alps stated. "You are not the person I thought you were. I was foolish to question you as I did. I am not happy about the people who have to die, that won't change, but it does not do any good to be mad at you for it. They have made the choice to stand against a world where we are not in fear of our extinction. This is not a civil war. One path is the loss of all our lives, the other is a hopeful future. It's not a mere difference of opinion. Greed or madness are the only things that would make one choose the first choice." Ellis watched Alps quietly for a moment before stepping backwards and vanishing into the shadows with parting words.

"Spare me the philosophical rhetoric. You've quite a day tomorrow and I should think you'll be a mess without sleep." Alps would have thought she was only hiding, except that sensation of anxiousness, that telling feeling that actually told him she had been there.

"Why didn't she bother teaching me *that* trick I wonder?" Alps asked himself. He waited for her to somehow answer that, but knew she was gone. Alps moved back to the stairs and shuffled up them slowly. He had so much on his mind. It was clear, at least when it came to the opinion regarding her, the fox didn't much care one way or the other. By the time he was done walking through the quiet temple back to find his room, thankful it did not take much longer, his mind was nearly blank with need for sleep.

It gave him some time to appreciate the peacefulness of the temple. It was hard to believe that he really was a child in this other-worldly place. There was little doubt that his life would have been entirely different even if he had been in this place a little longer, but would it have ultimately been better? He would have been a temple focus, and he would have far fewer memories of an abusive nature, but he would not have Nita, or Nidaja or Reika or any of these friends he could not imagine life without.

He strolled along the outer hall, knowing that area at least so he was certainly no longer lost. The forest itself was a bit noisy. He was surprised how quiet it remained inside, but the walls were fortress-thick. He finally went back in through the front of the temple, and found his cozy, safe sleeping quarters. Nita was clutching a pillow in his place, but without disturbing her, he managed to switch places with it. It took less time for him to fall asleep than it did to get into bed with his life-mate-to-be.

Sirius, Book IV

A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

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Chapter 22

The island was such a peaceful place. The white royal life-mate of Nita Razelle gazed out over the water as it casually lapped at a sandy shore on the windward side of the island. Alps was barely able to see it from the narrow window of the temple, but it was high enough on the hill that it afforded some view. The location was safe, the air quiet, and the building itself comfortable even if fallen to disrepair. He found himself thinking about his future, and if this place would be a part of it. Would his mother come back here? Would she have any reason to bother resuming her life as a Letai Priestess if there were only a couple left in existence?

The wedding. The wedding had gone peacefully and uneventfully. Nita had been very happy to have the wedding in this place with few prying eyes. For all he and Nita had been through together, this single event represented little more than a foot note. Nothing was different between them for anyone but the general public who was, at that moment, unaware that their queen had even taken her life mate. The ceremony was a brief one, a gathering of him and all of his friends and new family. All the blood family he had in this world was there, represented by Luna. She had performed the ceremony, having Nita and Alps stand hand in hand for the first part of the ceremony, and fully embrace one another for the other half. Nidaja was allowed to interject if she had concerns about the union; she had none. Lyat acted as Alps' peer, expressing his approval for Alps' choice. This was a traditional role for the Asuna, but Alps himself had wanted to include their culture on the union because Lyat declared him a brother.

There was a feast of sorts from the provisions that had been brought which Lira had felt was reckless given that they did not know when or if they would encounter another town, but Luna felt certain that they would be alright. It was certainly no feast by Diera standards, but it was certainly the most filling meal Alps had enjoyed in a while. Wind rustled the trees outside, the air more than a bit cool, but the white wolf's thick fur padded under his black uniform as he stood in a sunbeam fought back the chill well enough. As peaceful as his pairing with Nita had been, it was even more peaceful now. The days ahead might be anything but peaceful, but for now he had this time. Lyat, Vhale, Reika, Lira, and Mytan had all been ushered off by Luna to the other side of the temple, giving Alps and Nita plenty of room. Nidaja seemed content to stay on the 'royal' side of the temple and Luna certainly wasn't going to object to that.

Alps felt a gentle hand come to rest on his shoulder. He smiled, assuming it was either Nita or Nidaja. It was the younger sister's voice which lilted in his stately, focused ear.

"How does it feel to be royalty, young slave?" she asked. Alps smiled wryly at that.

"I'm technically a lot older than either of you." He chuckled. He thought back, briefly and darkly, to his new certainty that he'd spent those hundreds of years with Ellis. He chased the thought away. Nidaja wrapped her arms around him, and he slid his hands down over her arms, which he found to be bare. He looked up and tilted his head back, before slowly turning in her embrace. His eyes widened.

The sister of his life mate was completely bare before him, not so much as a bauble or a bracer adorning her. His ears burned rose inside as he swallowed back a bit of anxious excitement.

"Ahh... Heh... Nidaja, you seem to have dressed down from the ceremony." He offered cautiously. He did not want to offend Nita if Nidaja got to him first, but he worried about insulting or hurting the younger sister by turning her away. Nidaja took Alps' hand in hers.

"Come. We should go someplace less..." The general gazed out the window, the picturesque scene of natural paradise outside. "... Drafty." She smiled and pulled Alps away, letting him follow along. What choice did he have? In Amanian society males who had been claimed as a life mate did so in submission to the family of their mate. Nidaja had no less right to ask him to follow her than when he was a slave. He considered again that very little had really changed for him. He padded through a few dark halls, the light not reaching them through the overgrowth that crept up the side of the temple, and to the large bedroom that had been his home with Nita the past few nights. The former slave wondered where the general's sister was as he was being led around like this. As he was brought into the room, he was given his answer.

On the rather oversize frumpy down-stuffed-settled-and-re-fluffed bed was perched the Queen of the Amanian Nation, on her knees, hands between them on a large pillow. She was only less bare than Nidaja in that she was wearing her single-peaked circlet, her crown. Alps blushed at that a bit, as his lover had barely worn her crown since they left the castle. He padded toward her as she wagged her tail slowly behind her, apparently just enjoying watching the approach of her mate. Alps stopped short of the bed. He regarded her breathtaking feminine beauty with rapt attention. His own heavy, fluffy tail was unable to hold still. He was not sure why Nidaja wanted to be bare to bring him to his lover, but it only intensified the raw longing sensations that seemed to be very welcome to that particular moment.

Alps carefully and somewhat ceremonially undressed because he was sorely out of place in his uniform. He had not discussed with the queen what he would be wearing

now that he was her mate, but she had decided that it would be most appropriate for him to be wearing the uniform for the wedding. He had always rather liked his nice, neat clothes that the royal family had afforded him and hoped that he would get to wear something similar. He had no idea what the life-mate of the queen was supposed to look like. He assumed that it might be something different from the uniform however to make him stand out a bit. Still, his intentions were less about the uniform in that moment and more about being out of it.

“Come up on the bed, Alps.” Nita murmured.

“Not something you have to seriously invite me for.” He crooned back eagerly, moving up onto the thick, padded surface and crawling deliberately over to his mate. He touched his nose to hers and she pushed her head forward, rubbing her whiskers among his own, ears folding back as she sighed happily.

“Mine forever. It’s a lovely feeling Alps. I thought about it a lot while you were away with the Asuna. What it would be like when I got you back. How much I wanted to hold you. It’s not something I take for granted, I will assure you.” She spoke in her even, savory, tender tone. Alps gasped a bit as he felt Nidaja’s weight settle on the bed behind him, and long, powerful arms wrapped around him. He had a sister on either side of him, holding him. This called back quite a few memories of time spent with them both, but he did not think that they both intended to celebrate Nita’s special day. It seemed like something that Nita herself would want to share alone with him. Then again, most of his intimate moments for quite some time were with her alone, in the rare peaceful time that they had shared before things got crazy. Alps spoke up on his feelings.

“I am rather surprised to get to see you both tonight. I had suspected that Nita might wish to have her mate to herself, but I cannot say that I am unhappy to spend this wonderful night with the two who hold the most special place in my heart.” He offered, hoping that his wording insulted neither of them. It was Nita who answered.

“You are not becoming family to me alone. You are family to Nidaja too. All our lives we have been close, and we have confided and trusted more in one another than in any other.” She seemed to want to explain to Alps the exact why. The former slave did not care so much about the why as he did to make sure that it was really okay with them both.

“That’s right Alps. Before you become a part of our lives, I shared in every moment of my sister’s sadness and trouble. Every setback and every challenge. Why would I not happily be there for her triumphs and happiness?” she asked. When it was put like that, few things had ever made more sense to Alps. He did not get to reply. He was pushed forward slightly by Nidaja and pulled forward slightly by Nita, his muzzle to hers, her mouth parting to cup to his parting maw, their tongues pushed hungrily to one another. Rarely had Alps kissed so ferociously, but the passion that had been building between the pair since that morning had known little respite. The kiss they shared at

the end of the ceremony was nearly platonic compared to what they involved their tongues and mouths with then. He wagged a lot faster at that, and gasped as Nidaja's hands slide down over his chest and to his tummy, rubbing in a warm, spoiling manner. There was little to be begged more than this, but he knew more was intended. He widened his eyes as Nidaja pulled Alps backwards a little, arching his back as his back pushed against her bosom. This exposed his front very deliberately to Nita, who leaned back in appreciation of him. Many a night had been spent with her hands moving over his body as much as they had desired. Alps was her slave. His body belonged to her entirely. Still, somehow it felt different now that he belonged to her in a very special way that coin would not provide. As her hands slid over his chest, he parted his maw slightly and breathed out a long, sensual breath. He loved the feel of his closest lover touching him, knowing he could trust that not only would she not hurt him, but that her intention was almost always pleasure. The queen spoke in a near whisper.

“We have a great deal to do when we leave here, Alps, but I want to make sure you understand... it may be days before we resume our journey, and I intend to make the most of my time with you.” As she said that, her smaller, dexterous and skillful warm hand wrapped around his already aching cock, giving a slow, undulating squeeze to him. He folded his ears back, gasping out as a bead of readily available pre swelled at his tapered cock-tip. He gritted his teeth just a little as Nidaja slipped her hand down over his tummy, still holding him tightly from behind, and stole that drop away from his tip, the sensitive glans pulsing from her touch. He watched, incensed, as the general's strong feminine hand brought that glistening salty pre up to her sister's muzzle. A long, delicate, graceful tongue flitted out slowly and scooped it up, before her mouth pushed forward and engulfed Nidaja's fingertips, suckling that flavor away. Alps' heart raced. This promised to be a long night!

Lyat panted out softly, back arched, shoulders pushed into the firm, padded back of the red-velvet couch, his thighs parted as he kept his hands exactly where he had been ordered to leave them, at the back corner of both sides of the couch. His vest and shirt were open, his grey spotless chest bared as it rose and fell in deep, anxious breaths. His dark trousers were around his ankles as his knees stayed parted wide. Luna, her robes in a pile not far from the couch, sat beside Lyat at the far right of the couch, and lowered herself again. Her hand was wrapped around the base of his pulsing, very generous erection as her tongue swirled and darted and stroked and undulated against the tip of his dark spire of flesh. He looked to the opposite side of him and flattened his ears.

“You are not having to be staying for this, yes? You can be wandering around, is a nice day for walking.” His shallow voice was directed at Reika who was sitting on the arm of the couch opposite Luna as she worked over her Brother. Luna had told Reika that she intended to do nice things to Lyat, and she might not care to see that. Reika had simply given them more room on the couch. Luna was making good on her threat.

Lyat winced a bit as he felt his cock taken a few inches and the pressure drop as Luna began to suckle on it. He whined a bit to Reika, "Is improper you there, seeing such things happen to family."

"Reika likes seeing Brother happy. Is very... yes." She nodded a bit at that. Lyat fluttered his eyes shut as he gave a bit of a surrendering sigh. His toes spread as Luna cupped his heavy sack and rolled those hidden orbs within. Reika did not speak as she watched this, seeming not to want to more obviously distract. Lyat gritted his teeth tighter. His sister obviously knew that if she distracted too much Luna would make her leave, and Luna was having fun with how anxious this made her large hyena lover. The priestess smiled around his cock as he shifted his hips slowly. He decided to just try to ignore Reika. He had been worked up for almost an hour before Luna decided to actually do something about it and he needed the release. So he kept his arms out along the back of the couch and he held still. If he just focused on what Luna was doing, she might allow him to peak and be content with that. He felt her mouth slide off of him, her now wet hand rising and falling up and down his shaft.

"Maybe hide that somewhere warm?" he asked Luna a little self-consciously.

"Brother is being shy. Is silliness." Reika commented.

"She's seen you without clothes before. She already said." Luna commented, hand riding up and down his entire length.

"Yeah, but not being so aroused and – like this." He indicated.

"Have too." Reika commented.

"What?" he asked.

"Reika sees with Nidaja. Is so happy. Reika hides. Always nice to see Lyat happy." She nodded again. Lyat sucked in a heavy breath, however, distracted from his alarming conversation with Reika. Luna cupped her hands on either side of his still quite solid girth and began to eagerly stir and strum her tongue-tip along the sensitive glans of the larger Asuna's cock as he tensed right up for her.

Lyat shook his head a little, giving up on arguing, it was impossible with Reika even when he was not at a clear disadvantage. He gripped the back of the couch as he took his eyes off of Reika. He could not make her leave, but he did not have to watch her as she scooted just a touch closer and narrowed her eyes to for some bizarre reason savor what was being done to him. He made a quiet vow to scold Luna for her mischief but he was in no state to hassle her about it right then.

Fortunately, Reika did not see it as important to give tips or in any other way intervene as Lyat tilted his head back, feeling that hot, perfect mouth slip down around his length more than half way, her hand cupping his heavy sack and the other hand just

pushing to his chest to keep him anchored where he was. He had no intention of leaving, spreading his thighs a little more and pushing a little more into that silky hot muzzle as his rounded hyena ears pinned back in his grimace of pleasure. He moved one hand to Luna's back and stroked over her shoulders, her motion shifting over him slightly as her head drew up, and then pushed back down. He exhaled heavily and pushed his toes into the time-worn carpet that rested under the old but sturdy couch. He began a steady, rhythmic breathing to just savor each moment, sure that Luna would happily push him over the edge in such a fashion, she'd gladly done it more than once before. He was certainly not used to such treatment by the Asuna back home, so he assumed this oral fixation was a wolf thing. Nidaja had happily done so as well. He had no reason to complain.

"Reika wonders if it feels the same for girl or boy..." The pondering voice of his sister finally broke through, just as she looped an arm over his shoulder, seeming perfectly content to finally sit right by him as if nothing more were going on than listening to the priestess tell a story. Lyat closed his eyes tighter, trying hard to ignore her company. He did not care that much that she was seeing, but he worried that it would distract or push away Luna which he would be quite irritated about. Luna did stop a moment, making Lyat tense up suddenly as she spoke.

"I have heard it's not much different, but there is a pretty big difference in the time it takes from person to person for boys. Some with less experience... well, their trousers barely have time to hit the rug before you are having to swallow it down, others you have to resort to other means because your jaw gets tired. I find that ladies tend to need a very different range of things to satisfy them, so I would say it has to be different based on that. I know both must be nice though because I have not been asked to refrain..." The length of Luna's speech finally dragged a whine out of the exasperated large hyena, his fur bristling. He was going to thump Reika's ears good at this rate.

"Lyat is usually being more patient, Priestess Luna." The younger hyena girl stated, leaning forward a bit. Lyat partly opened an eye to see her plainly watching as Luna returned to her tending of her brother. He felt his ears burn and he tilted his head to the side again, long, wonderful strokes of Luna's trained hand sliding up and down below her mouth, teasing and working him in obvious show to her audience. Reika's attention was held better than he'd ever gotten her to focus before, and there was nothing he could bring himself to do to stop it.

Nita's fingertips were graceful in tending to Alps in general when she'd stroke his ears, tease his thighs or tickle his body. She often did when they were alone but it was rare that the queen used them exclusively upon his member. She seemed almost as if she were trying to push him along his line of pleasure with just her fingertips this time. She tilted his cock upward, teased with her thumbs at his wet, slick glans, let them slide down, tickle and tease his light-furred pouch between his thighs, then drawing them

back up his pulsing shaft. Nidaja had her chin over his shoulder seeming content to watch what Nita was doing. Alps had, at first, tried to move his hands up to stroke his life-mate's breasts when she leaned into reach but Nidaja pulled his arms back almost painfully behind him. He really never minded if Nidaja was a little rough with him. She could cause a bit of pain when she was determined but it was never something Alps shied away from. He could certainly take it and the passion behind it made him feel wanted in ways that just knowing he caused her pleasure did not.

"Which of us gets the easy one?" asked the general behind him after a bit. She nipped his ear, making him gasp. He was not sure what she meant.

"I am feeling a bit frantic, I think I would be happy if it were me." The queen finally replied after teasing his tip with her thumb and index finger a while, pinching oh-so-gently, with that slick pre making him slippery amid all the tweaking, sending little shocks of pleasure through his body with each pinch of her fingers. He gave a little gasp as she leaned forward. He tilted his head to receive her kiss, but it was Nidaja who was the target. He had seen them kiss but a few times before, they did not do it often seeming to prefer to push all their affection upon him. It was in these rare moments that he was reminded that they had been together a very long time before he came into their lives and for most of their lives there was no one else they could trust so much but one another. He arched his back a little and pushed his hands a little further down behind him. Nidaja, pushed up against his back, had her thighs parted a bit to keep herself steady to hold onto him tight. She could not let go of his arms if she were to hold him in place, but to do so meant she was in reach of his fingertips in a rather enjoyable fashion for the white-furred wolf. He pushed his fingertips deftly against puffy warm wolf-mound. A sharp little draw of air barely perceptible greeted his ear as she kissed her sister so smolderingly.

Alps grimaced a bit with pleasure as well when Nita, surely unaware of what her lover was doing behind him, wrapped a hand around his girth and began a slow, steady stroking of that twitching length, spreading his slick pre up and down the entire pinkish spire of his lust. He spread his fingers a little, parting the puffy hot folds of Nidaja's dewy sex before pushing his middle digit in between them and strumming slowly and casually the swelling bud between. The more physical of the sisters pushed her hips back and forth a little, but did not draw away from the former slave fully.

The kiss finally ended and Nita looked at Alps with longing, joyful eyes. She leaned in and kissed him no less passionately than what she had done moments before. Part of him, with a pang of guilt, felt that he had somehow been joined to them both. He certainly felt like he shared that place in Nita's heart and while it felt a little greedy of him, it was certainly not an unpleasant thought, knowing that his life might be shared like this for as long as his body held out. Nidaja held his shoulders, keeping him in place as he kissed the queen deeply and slowly, his tongue actually somewhat mirroring the motions of his fingertips between Nidaja's powerful thighs. She remained quiet about what he was doing and he did not try to betray the little bit of private attention he offered to her. He assumed Nita would not care but he was obviously not

supposed to be in control of the situation.

Nita pulled away from the kiss slowly, as if reluctant, before gracefully turning around. She murmured softly as she faced the opposite way, the head of the bed.

“Do not let him move. I wish to tend to this myself.” Her words were as willful and powerful as any order she’d given for war even as soft as they were. He felt Nidaja’s grip tighten on his arms, holding them behind him a little more aggressively but she did not take those dripping folds out of his reach. Alps watched, trembling a bit as Nita slipped down onto all fours and slowly backed up, tucking a hand between her thighs, fingertips again teasing at his tip. He worried a moment that she was going to strum herself with his tip, a thing he’d suffered a few times for easily hours of teasing. He would certainly not complain, but he was not sure, with as aroused as he was, he would be able to control himself for a lot of that kind of treatment.

Fortunately, it seemed the queen was feeling merciful as, the moment she felt his tip spreading her silky honeypot wider around it, she sank back in a long and heavy, very thorough stroke. Alps grunted a bit, actually stopping the strumming of Nidaja’s clit a brief moment as he felt himself hilted so aggressively within the one who wished to have him till his final day. He arched his back and felt a tug from Nidaja. Hold still meant hold still. He gasped a bit, and then flattened his ears, intensifying the strumming of the utterly soaked nethers of Nita’s sister as the queen drew herself back and forth slow and steady. Alps looked down, the queen’s fluffy green tail held high over her back to provide a rather gratuitous view of each deep, longing penetration. He felt Nidaja’s chin over his shoulder. He did not have to look up. He knew what she was seeing, and by how her honey spilled down over his knuckles, he knew how she felt about the view.

There was a slow, even shift from the rather quick, jarring occasional hilted Nita gave him to a more steady, rolling stroke, an utterly masturbatory working of his shaft inside her, the swing of her body no less dutiful than any attention he could give himself with his mind wandering those fickle, fanciful dreams he knew as he came into adulthood in dark forest or warm summer stream. He needed no thought beyond the present to aid him, and certainly needed no motion but what was offered to push him steadily along.

“I ... I’m already close, I should warn...” he whispered.

“Exactly... what I... want...” Nita puffed as she lurched back steadily against him. Alps understood in that moment what they meant by the easy one. When he’d have time with Nita and Nidaja often the first release was precariously easy, but after that it was hot and heavy and as reckless as they wanted. They meant to spend quite a lot of time with him this night and he could not have been happier! He could hear Nidaja’s breath puffing in his ear too, short little gasps occasionally punctuating deeper, steady breaths as he would occasionally have to change up his technique as fingers felt the burn of constant motion. It was not a position and a motion they were used to. He

moved his fingers back and forth in a playful wet sloppy flutter and she sucked in a hot breath and huffed into his ear,

“That... do that, just that, don’t slow down or stop or I will fucking bite you.” Her words where pinched almost to a whispered whine, but they were dark and serious. He knew why by how she said it. She was close to release a couple of times before, perhaps, but Alps had changed what he was doing and it pushed her back. His wrists burned a bit but he did not dare stop. Yes, there were plenty of times that Nidaja teased him, even let him start to cum before stopping outright to watch him squirm but he did not dare to do that to her. She went ridged, shaking slightly, and heat poured between his fingers. It was all he could take. His cock jerked inside Nita.

“Nnnph!” He announced with a little stifled noise, and Nita pushed her hips back heavily, grinding him in deep so he spent that first easy load as tidy and clean as could be so deep inside her that it would take a bit of work to spill a drop back out. The queen gave a long, happy, spoiled groan to the shivering pair behind her. The white male flattened his ears, closing his eyes and just letting the short, almost teasing motions the verdant queen provided to him milk out the last few drops of that diligently won release.

Luna pushed both of her hands onto Lyat’s shoulders as she swung a leg over his lap, straddling his hips. He looked a little surprised at her. The priestess was a lot less shy about Reika’s presence there than he’d thought, this had already been established, but he had not suspected she would willingly do what it was pretty clear she intended to do.

“You might... be wishing to get up... a bit...” Lyat panted to his sister. The lady hyena did as she was told which pleased her brother a bit, but only until he understood why. She simply plopped down on her knees in front of him so that she had a better view. He wanted to elaborate on what he had intended but Luna gave him no chance, simply driving her hips down with her fingertips guiding him right where every muscle in his body wanted to drive him anyway. He could not restrain the sinking groan that spilled from his parted mouth as his back arched and head tilted back. The rounded parting curves of Luna’s backside plushly pressed against the full and churning sack of the spotty male, his muscles flexing, straining to only press himself tighter to his welcome lover.

“Nidaja does not mind this?” asked his sister, completely ruining the moment.

“Nidaja is helping Nita with very lucky servant wolf. Nidaja and Lyat are understanding about this thing – aahhh....” He flinched a bit as he felt Luna’s teeth push tight to his shoulder. She lifted her head a little, panting.

“Are you hurt?” she asked in a tone that seemed a little dizzy.

"No, Lyat is okay" He answered reassuringly, then opened his eyes wider, catching himself as he said it, and blurting out suddenly, "No, injuries! Lyat is most injured!" he fairly shouted, glancing to Reika as canines breached flesh on his upper shoulder, the wolfess clutching his cock deep inside her. He had forgotten Luna did that. He winced a bit, trying to stifle himself so as not to alarm Reika. She sat up much straighter as she likely saw the ribbon of crimson trace a perfect dark line down his arm. Luna cupped one of her hands to it and began slowly and steadily rocking her hips, her lids heavy as she crooned,

"Poor dear, allow this loving and dutiful priestess to heal that." Reika tilted her head very slowly.

"How is you hurting yourself Lyat? This is not so hard, even Reika is done without injury." Lyat decided not to ask who it was with. He was pretty sure he knew. He closed his eyes, stabbing pain melting away so easily as he felt the essence-healing of the priestess. He wondered if she did this to him because she felt he was just strong enough to handle it. Was anyone else a victim of it? Reika would not respond very rationally to such a thing. He finally answered.

"The Letai is sometimes rough like this. Is passion to them." He didn't want to create a negative feeling about Luna. This was probably not easy for her either. Reika thought a moment about this, it seemed, actually looking up before responding.

"Letai is gentle. He says kind things and does not bite." Her answer had noting to do with Luna and cemented some of Lyat's assumptions, but he could not, for that moment, bring himself to care. He began softly panting as the priestess pushed her hips up and down a little faster, nuzzling at Lyat's cheek, seeming suddenly delighted, joyful, no longer dizzy and distant. She got what she needed from that little act. He lowered his head, pulling her closer, hands splaying over her backside and pushing her a little faster up and down in his lap. He wanted to present Luna with a reminder that he always forgave her for that. The heat of the moment was bringing Lyat thankfully quickly toward what he knew Luna would not be satisfied to leave without. He groaned softly, not caring about Reika hearing that tone from him. She had established that she was fine with what was going on and he did not care to add complexity where it wasn't warranted. He huffed in a steadier pace as he helped the priestess' hips rise and fall faster over that dark, throbbing flesh. The eager motion came to a jarring halt when a less familiar voice interrupted the wonderful rise of pleasure.

"Oh! Oh goodness me, I am so- I didn't, Goodness, I... I..." Lyat looked behind him, startled. Reika had risen to her feet as well. In the doorway to the lobby that the couch was in, probably moving on to the southern half of the temple, was a very shaken and apologetic-looking verdant-furred Mytan. Adorned in white shirt and dark trousers he had dressed down from the event and was likely wandering around just exploring the temple since the Letai had always been the highest point of interest for him. A bit of additional stress for the situation was caused by the fact that Luna did not stop at all.

She didn't even stagger her motions. She was in her own little world of pleasure as she jerked her hips steadily in his lap.

"Mytan can be sitting as well, is good for friends to be happy together." Reika's tone was bright and cheerful. Lyat was actually warmed to hear that from her as she had spent so much of her time either furious or in some manner of chaos. Since they had begun their journey with Alps it seemed that she had lost some of the madness that seemed to plague her. Still, this did not put Mytan immediately at ease.

"What? Oh! N-No, I could not disturb the priestess, she is ... She is essence drawing I think? No..." The fidgeting green male clasped his hands together, locked in place by what Lyat could only describe as self-doubt. Lyat grunted a bit as Luna's hips slapped harder to his own. His sister answered.

"Luna is not being disturbed. Not even distracted." Reika pointed to indicate the ebon flesh slipping in and out of the priestess as her hips rose and fell rapidly, making Lyat spread his toes into the carpet a bit. Reika padded hastily over to Mytan and took both his hands, pulling him forward. Lyat closed his eyes. He could not watch this disaster, he was so close to just flooding his priestess, it's all he wanted to do in that moment. He felt pressure beside him on the red velvet couch.

"I am sure they don't want the intrusion!" Lyat heard Mytan's exasperated voice.

"Reika wants it. They is fine for Reika and you is a guest." Her tone was suddenly low and soothing, almost as he would expect from Luna. Lyat tensed up a lot. Sure the fleeting pondering thought had danced through his mind at seeing this aroused Reika, but was she actually going to try to do something to a horrified Mytan right beside the icon of everything he practically worshipped?

"Ahhh! Wait, what are you – mmph..." His cry was silenced in a fashion Lyat knew had to be a kiss. He closed his eyes tighter, clamping his hands on Luna's ass and slamming her hips harder down into his lap, making her cry out with pleasure. He would focus on Luna. That's all. He would just focus on Luna!

The white-furred former slave rested on his back in the somewhat frumpy old bed that they had claimed as Nidaja rubbed over his tummy in a happy, slow circle, gazing up at Nita as she slipped up alongside him on her knees. They had spent a few minutes kissing and stroking one another, the queen teasing the younger sister's nipples with her gentle teeth for Alps to visually enjoy. Watching them kiss and touch and play had gotten him through the oversensitive afterglow and his cock rested fully swollen and eager upon his lower tummy once more. Nidaja gathered it in her gentle hand as she let her touch trail down from his tummy as Nita nodded to her sister.

"Please, a most gracious offering to you, General Nidaja." She nodded to the bare and athletic green-toned wolfess. Nidaja grinned at her sister's proper gesture. It was something the two of them did most frequently when they were drunk. They would over-play the prim and proper nature of their station in a private setting as a means of poking fun of it. They did not take one another so seriously in private and it was a life Alps was always happy he got to see.

"Your generosity pleases the council, Your Majesty, I shall partake!" Nidaja swung a leg over Alps' lap, making him grin a bit. He moved a hand to stroke along the general's powerful thigh as she reached in front of her and petted and stroked Alps' twitching cock. "Such treasure the royal house has acquired; the pride of these lands I assure you!" Nidaja rambled playfully, licking her lips.

"Tarry but a moment, my most valued sibling!" Nita commanded, holding her hand up.

"What time must I have for distraction, but tarry I must as my host has been kind." Nidaja rested her ass against Alps' upper thighs, keeping him nicely pinned. "What say you, kind Queen Razelle?" she asked. Nita leaned over Alps' tummy.

"This gift is best enjoyed properly conditioned." She smiled up at her younger but stronger sister. She pushed her hot, wet mouth over Alps' cock, taking him in deeply, rolling his length against her tongue and spreading intentionally copious saliva all over him. She took her time, seeming to let Nidaja take the visual of it in. Finally, she drew her mouth off of Alps, leaving him soaking wet and glistening and hot for the larger of the two. Nidaja took him delicately in her fingertips, lifting her hips slowly.

"You are most wise to observe this, though I must insist that the thought of sharing such riches with you has left me conditioned in kind." She pushed a hand between her thighs, tucking fingers between dark folds and drawing them back, a ribbon of clear glistening honey briefly forming a wet tendril between claw-tip and puffy dark folds before breaking. Nita drew in a deep breath.

"I fear this has become a bit of a comparison of treasure, my dear sister. Though there are certainly ways around jealous thoughts..." She took Nidaja's hand in hers and lifted those wet fingers to her lips, her long, dexterous, graceful tongue darting and coiling between and around the general's tangy-sweet honey-coated fingers. Alps tensed up a bit, feeling his sack tighten a bit at the sheer wanton expression and taboo act of sharing, his cock throbbing so much harder than it had even inside his lover's mouth as he watched Nita suck her sister's fingertips clean. Alps throbbed in this manner right as Nidaja's slick, puffy, lust-engorged channel took him, her hips sinking down and driving the lupine male as deep as their position allowed. Alps arched his back a little, a hot exhale coming from him before he relaxed again, legs splaying a little as he caressed the general's shapely backside. He felt her squeeze him deep inside, a reminder of the first time he was ever driven into that hot, strong body. Her hips began to slowly rock, teasing his pleasure slowly higher as Nita cooed sweetly at Nidaja. No

more playful banter passed between them, the gift had been given. Nita decided to enjoy a bit of her lover for herself. She moved her leg up and over Alps' chest and backed up a bit into a familiar position that he was hoping she'd take. He pushed his mouth warmly to her mound and dug his tongue in deep, not minding his own taste as it resided in there, hooking and darting, pumping that tongue in and out of the one who had chosen him for life. Nita gave a long, happy growl and just leaned forward, holding her sister, stroking, touching, caressing her breasts, kissing her occasionally; it became every bit as much about the two of them as it was the wolf they shared beneath their hips. Alps could not have been happier to be a part of it. He felt that selfish rush again that his place in the royal house was truly with them both because of how close the sisters were. This was the one part of their existence they had, before, shared in secret that he was now to be a permanent part of.

It seemed the emotional drive of what they were doing, how they were sharing, and how important it was to them both did as much or more than the physical aspects of lovemaking because they both seemed to become quickly more urgent, rolling against him, pulling at one another, and even growling and panting readily in moments of their tender lovemaking. The mood of it never really changed, it did not become more feral or more desperate, the two never let go of one another, it was just that Nidaja arched and ground herself rather suddenly into Alps' lap and shivered heavily with a bit less care than it usually took on his part for him to get her there, and Nita buckled against her sister, holding tight and trembling as Alps very willfully took the initiative to let them share the moment and fluttered his tongue madly against her clit. Her heat spilling down his tightening sack, the general whispered to Alps as he teased Nita more deliberately.

"Good, Alps. Always so kind to my sister. Make her pop for us. For me and you both, make her feel happy, like she's flying because of how much we love her." Alps' heart raced, ears flat, tears in his eyes. Yes, he'd felt intimate with them both, certainly, and he knew that they loved each other dearly, they were as close as family could be. However, he had not actually really been subjected to the deepness of Nidaja's adoration for her sister, her care of the Queen's happiness and pleasure until that moment. And he took to her plea for his participation in that love with gusto. His tongue danced with a trained fever upon the swollen nub of the queen's clit, and he moved his hips more eagerly under Nidaja to stir her own wet heat with his own greedily pulsing flesh.

The pair held one another on top of him as he held the general's hips tightly, his own pumping steadily and briskly beneath, as he cupped his mouth to Nita's sex just in time to hear her wail with shaking pleasure, his tongue grinding ardently to her most sensitive inch. Nidaja had to hold her whimpering sister as she rode out her pleasure, her own hips rolling eagerly to the male between her thighs. Very quickly becoming oversensitive, Nita pushed forward and slipped away from Alps' tireless and well-meaning tongue. His cheeks were a bit wet, but he certainly did not mind being scented of his lover, and marked a little of himself for that matter. He sat up a little, looking at the more slowly rising and falling lady wolf in his lap, and finally just reached up and

pulled her sideways, rolling her onto her back. She looked up at him, seeming a little startled as he shifted her position so suddenly, but Alps made her bark out in lustful pleasure as his hips slapped hers hard, then drew back and rocked her hard again, the wolf wanting to give the athletic Nidaja a bit of vigor. Finally, he reared up, getting onto his knees and cradling the passionate general's backside a little as he pushed in deep again and gave a nice view to her sister.

"Time to enjoy this to the highest of my physical ability..." Alps growled needfully. Nita wagged her verdant tail briskly and leaned in close.

"My turn to use this treasure to make *you* pop, dear sister." The queen growled.

"It... It's alright; you really don't have to do that..." Mytan's voice wavered with uncertainty as Lyat finally glanced over to him. He was directly beside him as Luna rode pretty heavily in his lap, panting with heat and vigor as her hips slapped firmly against his own. Lyat wanted to tell his sister no, but what kind of hypocrisy would that be? The green-furred male was arched back a little, obviously not actively pushing Reika away who had slipped down before him and was carefully undoing his belt. He looked back to the girl's brother with a meek expression of non-aggression. He did not want to make the very strong hyena angry.

"She is being stronger willed than Amani boys." He confessed to the slightly shaking Emerald Amanian. "But is okay to try to make her stop. Luna is great healer wolf. She heals Reika bites so fast, I am betting." He wanted to imply that he was not going to harm Mytan if his sister continued, but that she might harm him if she couldn't. He gave a slight gasp of affirmation that he understood as his mostly flaccid pink masculinity was brought into view. Lyat pulled Luna harder into his lap, huffing, grunting a bit, focusing on the pleasure that was fast rising in him. Luna seemed a little more lucid at that point also, looking over to Mytan a bit and smiling wistfully, not commenting on what Reika was clearly about to do.

"Please don't bite..." Mytan whispered to Reika as his cock vanished into her charcoal-colored muzzle. Lyat blushed a bit, looking away again as he heard a familiar sinking whine from the poor wolf. He didn't make any more noise for a while, and Lyat got to think only about his own lupine companion riding him quite a bit harder as she got over her trance of healing seconds before. Luna lurched harder against Lyat and spoke up a bit to Reika, not helping the larger hyena slip toward his peak at all.

"Reika, cup him underneath with your hand... there you go, gentle now, move your tongue in circles..." Her voice was breathless and heated, but she sounded oh so helpful. Lyat internally whined. What was she trying to do, train Reika to pleasure the Amanian right beside them? Was that something typical in a Letai temple? Surely someone had to have taught Luna to do the things she knew how to do, but it had not

occurred to him until right then. Surely it could wait.

“Oh by the fires...” gasped Mytan. Lyat looked over, watching the slender male writhe a bit, his eyes glancing helplessly over to him. Luna thumped her hips hard against Lyat, jarring him a bit. He had let go of her hips without thinking about it and she apparently liked him focused on fucking her. He gripped again, pumping the bouncing wolfess harder with his hands, keeping his hips mostly still as the wet squelching sound of their union rose again between them.

“Is that... better?” panted Luna.

“Aheh... huh... huhh...” groaned the male. Lyat gripped Luna’s thighs tighter. He found himself caring a little less about who was doing that to Mytan and appreciating more that their less battle-ready teammate was enjoying the heat of pleasure too. It made Lyat a little competitive on a base and feral level. He needed to provide his gift to Luna first. For the moment he took his mind of Reika’s mischief beside him, looking at the priestess, leaning in to kiss her, passion rising as he felt her beginning to tighten more around him.

“Uh, oh... Hello, hi...” Mytan murmured cautiously. Lyat’s curiosity made him glance over. Reika had moved up, face to face with the green-furred male. He looked down a bit fitfully. Reika was still dressed, perhaps he thought her sitting in his lap was not going to be a big deal, but she wore nothing under that wrap around leather skirt, so he tensed up, enunciating a hot “Ahhaaaa...”, eyes wide, locking right on Lyat who stopped pumping wolf-hips over his own a moment. Reika put her hands on Mytan’s shoulders, panting out ferally as her hips pushed tight to his. Lyat looked away again.

“Glad to see her enjoying life, Lyat?” Luna whispered to him. He felt his cheeks heat up. Luna was so full of mischief for actually making him think about it right then. But he felt a resolute pang in his conscience as he listened to his sister pant as she rose and fell in the wolf’s lap beside him. He leaned up and whispered to his lover as she continued to bounce her hips over his even with his hands not moving her.

“Truly? Yes Luna. Reika’s life is being hard always.” He did not mind the distraction a moment, he still felt intense pleasure at the priestess’ hips rising and falling a bit more slowly as she listened. She whispered back to him, seeming to know he was trying not to distract Reika from her pleasure.

“It is still hard, but she’s not alone at least. There is no medicine for her better than this, I promise.” Lyat closed his eyes tightly, and took Luna’s hips in his hands and began to move them again. She was right. He knew everything about Reika, he’d seen her through scorn, ridicule and abuse, he’d stood by her and defended her, loved her when others were afraid to. His discomfort for the proximity of his sister in that pleasurable moment melted. Luna was very wise to know exactly what to say, and he looked over at Reika, smiling at what he saw.

Her eyes were closed, she was fixated perhaps on her pleasure, biting her dark lower lip slightly as she rose and fell steadily in the slightly panicked but obviously highly aroused wolf's lap. The lady hyena gave a soft little whine. Luna sped up a bit, watching Lyat as he watched the younger Asuna female bounce more desperately on Mytan. The green-toned male looked at the girl in his lap, and then back at Lyat. He and Luna both smiled to him, and he finally folded his ears back and groaned, closing his own eyes and embracing Reika as her hips sped up again. He huffed over her shoulder.

Lyat felt his pleasure rising fast then, no longer derailed by unnecessary feelings of anxiousness near Reika. He wanted her to feel pleasure. He wanted her to feel the kind of closeness that he realized a moment before he had thought she might never be able to enjoy in the normal sense. She'd healed and grown so much in a year. He looked to Luna and murmured in a soft, savory tone,

"S-slow down a little... Want to try to..." He was not sure how to say it specifically, but Luna smiled and nodded to him, panting a bit, tongue slightly out, pink and bouncing with her as she rode his lap. She seemed to understand.

"This is... okay?" Mytan asked, looking to Lyat rather than to Reika who seemed very much in her own little world. "In... Inside?" he asked, ears splaying wide, eyes barely open, his body shaking. Lyat could not help but smirk. He asked his permission to flood Reika. He gasped and winced, the hyena girl biting his shoulder.

"I don't think... that's up to anyone but her..." Luna panted. Mytan nodded a bit, and looked at Reika as if to ask her, but she doubled forward a little, pushing Mytan back as she gritted her teeth.

"Nk! Nnnk! nnnnHHnnnn!" She groaned in a wavering, lilting tone. She sped up, hips jerking.

"Faster..." Lyat puffed at Luna. She grinned and slapped her hips harder. Mytan rolled his eyes back.

"Reika, I'm gonna go... I am gonna go soon..." He shook a little.

"Haaaaahhhnnn!!" Reika wailed. Lyat pulled Luna harder and faster. He was a little slow, but felt himself give in finally, spewing his essence volcanically inside the bouncing priestess.

"Rrrrth, Yuruk, Hah! Priestess, Nnk!" Lyat barked loudly to the growling white-furred beauty. She held his shoulders, looking over at the other two as she enjoyed the Asuna flood inside her. She pushed herself tighter to him, rolling her thighs in hot, steady rhythm but keeping him so deep not a drop could escape. Reika was not so fastidious, apparently incensed even in the middle of her climax by her brother's admission of his sexual release. She cried out and slammed her hips recklessly in

Mytan's lap, splattering ejected opalescent seed all over his lap and the red velvet couch as her inner flesh obviously convulsed hard around his cock through a frantic climax. Lyat groaned out to Luna as he watched the rather graphic fun his sibling enjoyed. He rested his head against Luna's shoulder and panted heavily, feeling deliciously spent inside her. Mytan leaned back against the couch as Reika's hips finally ground to a halt in his lap. She panted against his chest, hanging her head as she twitched slightly in his lap.

"Feel better, Reika?" Luna asked.

"Reika is wet." She answered simply.

"That is good." Lyat stated.

"Reika is happy for Lyat is happy." She stated, seeming to have a little more trouble with common tongue when spinning in soaking hot afterglow.

"Lyat... is happy, yes." He huffed. "For Reika too."

"Thank you, brother." Reika panted after a short pause, and then leaned up and flicked her tongue at his jawline before sinking back against Mytan. "Thanking Mytan friend too. Maybe is not so good at asking, but is good he is not saying no. Reika might not have done no so good." Her words were a little awkward, but her point was pretty well made. Mytan puffed out a bit of a laugh and nodded, shifting a little under the girl's thighs. He leaned back a bit more and stroked Reika's cheeks and shoulders.

"This is not... how I imagined I would earn my honor with the Asuna." He huffed.

The white wolf male pushed himself heavily, hard and fast over Nidaja, hips slapping loudly to hers as she puffed and panted, swore and grunted under his vigorous attack. Nidaja preferred it rough, Alps had found, and Nita rather enjoyed the show. And put on a show he did, making every attempt to hoist Nidaja's tail out of the way if it blocked the view for him and his beloved queen, or turning himself a bit when he shifted to having one leg up, a foot on the bed, then back down. His muscles in his upper legs and in his back were already burning. He would likely not be moving terribly fast the next day, he was sure. He would find time to lament that tomorrow. That thought in mind he gritted his teeth and slammed himself against Nidaja a little harder. The lady wolf finally bucked her hips back into his hard, squalling beautifully as she erupted around Alps' pistoning shaft, the wet sounds of their impacts giving Nita plenty of confirmation of her sister's release.

"Stop, Alps. Hold on..." Nita spoke softly. Alps had some trouble slowing his hips. He was actually starting to get close to release himself. He ground to a halt

though, panting raggedly over the twitching General's back. Nita pulled Alps backward on the bed. Alps held Nidaja, lifting her chest up, and pulling her shoulders to his chest. This toppled her and her lover both. Alps' shoulders rested against the head of the bed, so he more or less cradled Nidaja in his lap. She squirmed happily, enjoying being held. Alps closed his eyes and sighed, letting the nicely climaxed Nidaja rest against him as he felt the warmth of her honey in his lap. Rather suddenly, Nidaja groaned out, arching against him. Alps thought she might have had an aftershock climax at first, but he felt Nita's hand up against his sack. He glanced down to see her muzzle parked over Nidaja's spasming sex. The queen's tongue fluttered busily over her sister's little bud of flesh.

"Oh Nita, you don't have to -Haaaah!" Nidaja arched again. Alps grinned and began slowly moving his hips under the lady wolf's. She held perfectly still, panting heavily, hands slipping down to hold Alps' own which were on her hips. She quivered all over. "It's not my wedding night, N-Nita, you should b-be getting this treatment!" the general panted desperately. Nita wagged.

"Oh, you think I'm not having a good time, sis?" she asked, licking her lips. She then cupped her mouth over the verdant warrior's mound. Alps could feel her mouth over him as he slipped his cock in and out of the tensing and relaxing beauty. It only stoked his fires hotter. He continued to move at a slow speed. Not much was required in Nidaja's position. She'd been teased during sex like this before, but she seemed particularly hair-point-triggered this evening, perhaps because of her emotional state, or maybe other factors were to blame. Alps wasn't in the mood to question it as her sex clamped tight around him again and Nidaja gave a sinking groan yet again. She had not plateaued for him in a long time and it was very gratifying.

"I'm gonna cum..." he warned, trying to control his speed. He felt like even if he stopped he'd be over the edge a few moments later anyway. It might have very well been too late if she wanted to stop. Fortunately that did not seem to be on Nita's mind. She kept her mouth where it was and growled out,

"Yes, Alps... fill her... every drop..." Nidaja whined pitifully, a sound that only incensed Alps more.

"S-stop Nita, I can't... I'm gonna... Aaahh.." She tensed and arched hard, shoulders against Alps' chest. He pulled both hands up to her chest, hands clamping and rolling breast-flesh eagerly as his hips rolled those few slow, undulating motions. He finally rolled his eyes back, feeling the surge flow from deep inside, and then spray copiously inside the again exploding general. Her feet came up and she shook heavily with a climax triggered by Nita's tongue and amplified by the sensation of wolfseed splattering her cervix. Alps held mostly still, letting that flood go deep inside his life-mate's sibling. He then gasped, feeling his cock pulled lewdly from Nidaja's overflowing honeypot. He felt the general's heat immediately replaced with the queen's very capable mouth. She began using her tongue around the former slave's tip as the climax he was already reeling from was suddenly amplified. He cried out and struggled. Nidaja

grabbed him and held him tight. He panicked a little, realizing that he was exactly where they wanted him. He shut his eyes tight and snarled in pleasure and pain that were mixed from being pushed past his peak. His feet came up and he felt his ankles grabbed by Nidaja.

He was held helplessly as Nita suckled and stroked his twitching flesh in her searing mouth as Nidaja's sex poured over his belly making a royal mess of him. He whined and struggled, knowing that they expected more than one release from him but back to back was a lot harder to do. He huffed and squirmed as Nita's hand came to rest on his sack, massaging and coaxing tenderly as her mouth slipped wetly up and down over the first few inches of that turgid, aching member.

"I can't.. I can't, I'm over-sen-" he began to protest. He felt Nita's teeth and he gasped, saying not one more word. Alps whined and arched, hands gripping Nidaja's breasts tighter, making the lady wolf growl a bit, her own hands coming to his and applying claws to his wrists until he lightened his grip. After a few more minutes of this torture, Nidaja's hand slipped back down to her puffy, drooling, messy sex and began strumming herself, making Alps twitch in Nita's mouth. Watching Nidaja play with her sex like that while his queen orally pleased him inches away from that source of her heat pulled the wolf right back toward his peak.

"Gonna be a lot of nights... like this... hope you know..." Nidaja growled this out tensely, anxiously working herself toward a new peak. It was a little easier for her than for Alps, but the thought that many nights might go like this so enticed him to think of other ways the two could share him that the thoughts alone were enough to drive him to a near panic of lust. He didn't say anything. He couldn't, his throat was almost raw from panting and his head was spinning. He just arched back, toes spreading and fed his beloved every newly fashioned drop of his seed that he could physically produce, spraying hot and hard in her muzzle. Nidaja erupted the moment she figured out Alps was cumming.

With that... something unusual interrupted the moment. He leaned forward, holding Nidaja in his arms as Nita pulled his twitching spent flesh from her mouth and gazed up into his eyes lovingly, pushing his thick cock back into her sister as she groaned with an aftershock, but Nita's expression went from sly sweet playfulness to awe. Alps widened his eyes as the light in the room increased a lot. His wings were glowing brighter, perhaps? He moved them, feeling like they were somehow heavier. When he moved them, they came into view, huge wings of light. Nidaja gasped, shaking.

At first, Alps was startled and worried. He could hide little wingies like what he had well enough, but these were going to be a problem. Had he really drawn so much essence in the encounter with these very powerful lovers? His wings had gone from 11 inches long when spread, to about four or five feet. They made so much light that he was sure someone on the opposite shore from the island could probably see them through the window of this old bedroom. He was about to say something about them

when he felt a little pop of pleasure race through him, gasping, and then there was a flash, a hiss and crackle, and glowing feathers were suddenly swirling rapidly around them, the weight on his shoulders gone.

“Oh! Your wings!” cried Nita. Alps tried to flitter them as he often did, but felt nothing. He looked over a shoulder. There was nothing. The feathers swirled into a rather dense band, and then spiraled right to Nita, and through her middle, making her gasp and cry out happily, holding her middle, leaning into Alps. “Love!” she cried.

“What?!” cried Nidaja, leaning over to her sister. The column of feathers of essence speared right through her back, making her cry out as her sister had. “Love!” she barked in stunned joy. Alps braced for the feathers, eager to know what he was doing to the now happily crying girls. But they skipped him and spiraled right out the window to parts unknown, leaving him naked of both clothing and wings. Nita and Nidaja held one another, Alps slowly softening cock finally plopping out of the younger of the two. After they had calmed down a little, Alps spoke up, a little stunned. He’d have to find out from Luna what happened to his wings.

“Are you alright?” he asked. “The feathers...” He did not think they were hurt, as they had been cuddling and giggling. Nita finally spoke up.

“Oh Alps... I... I don’t know what happened, but when those feathers went through me, I got to feel what you feel. I felt like I was inside your heart...” She stopped to pant a little. Nidaja continued for her.

“We know you love us, but actually getting to feel the intensity of it...” She leaned in and kissed Alps softly. “We worried sometimes... that things you endured in life before you met us would take away from what you could feel... Maybe love and tenderness would feel suspect to you and trusting would not be second nature... but we were wrong. Everyone who lives wants to be loved the way you love us Alps. That’s what we felt. That’s what you gave to us.” Nita embraced Alps and Nidaja both, and Alps caressed them sensually and slowly.

“I am gonna miss those little wings if they don’t come back, though.” Murmured Nita.

“Well, we know how to get them back.” her sister teased. Alps widened his eyes. They wouldn’t.

“Work him up for me, sis, I want him in me.” Nita crooned. Alps whined. They couldn’t. Nita rolled Alps slowly onto the bed with Nidaja getting off of him. Alps sprawled before them, a look of worry on his face. Down Nidaja went. He whimpered pitifully.

They could. They would.

And by the eternal stars they did.

The cool morning air might have seemed a little too brisk for some, but Alps rather relished it. He preferred the cold if he had the choice, and he drew in slow, deep, happy breaths as he watched the light of the sun spill through the trees on the east side of the island. He wore his crisp, clean uniform, though the gold frog buttons along the front remained undone as he had not bothered with them when he awoke. He had left Nidaja and Nita heaped upon one another in the large designated royal bedroom. He worried that they might actually have glued themselves together, but he did not want to wake them if they still needed rest.

"Long night?" came a soft, caring voice. Alps looked up the trail in the direction he was walking, spotting Luna there, in green and white robes on a half fallen tree which had been hewn centuries ago into a makeshift bench. The tree was still alive and so the bench had remained, though it was partially buried as sediment that had been deposited by rain slowly built up around it. Alps pulled himself achingly up onto the bench. He looked up at his mother who wore a wry, playful grin.

"I had a bit of trouble standing when dawn broke." her son admitted. Luna smiled at that and whispered back to him,

"I think everyone enjoyed their night, honestly. It's good to be back home, and it's better to make it feel more like home by sharing it so much with friends and family." She leaned back a bit, her brow furrowing a bit with concern. "Uhh..."

"They popped." Alps said as directly as he knew how. Luna was exactly who he wanted to talk to about it.

"What do you mean... they popped?" she asked with a note of concern in her voice.

"They got really big, like the wings of a great eagle, glowing bright, enough that I imagine our window was a beacon." Alps explained. "Then... Foof!" he made the wind-rushing sound effect that he remembered, gesturing how the feathers expanded out in a cloud and then, "They burst into feathers and whirled around the room into a tight band." Luna's eyes widened. "Then, whoosh, right through Nita, then through Nidaja, right in the middle of them, and they said they felt the love I felt for them, and it was pure joy." He was hoping that part of it was making his mother less concerned.

"And then the feathers disappeared?" asked the priestess.

"No, they flew out the window." Alps finished. Luna's ears flattened.

"Out the window, and up into the sky?" she asked.

"No, down. I don't know where from there. Nidaja was still... uh... sitting on me." He didn't know why he wanted to mask the intimacy from his mother. Not with all she'd done to him. He looked back up into her multicolored eyes. She seemed stunned, stroking Alps' back.

"You do not feel them anymore?" she asked. Alps shook his head.

"No... Nothing. I'm kind of glad. They certainly made me stick out, but I figured you might know what could cause them to just... do that. I wasn't trying to do anything to them at all." He noted. Luna shook her head this time.

"Mmm... No, I know of nothing that might cause it, but Ceriss might. She understood some of the advanced and more bizarre Essence abilities that I would not have studied. I very much focused on healing and the use of an essence focus to store energy." She leaned back again.

"There is another you could ask about it." Another familiar voice spoke, but Alps could not immediately place it. He and his mother both looked up the path in the direction which he'd come. Luna gasped deeply as if she were suddenly falling. Alps widened his eyes. There, on the path, was Ellis. Her hands in her sleeves, arms crossed as she stood beside someone else. Alps recognized her with a start, understanding his mother's reaction.

"Priestess Luna..." His words spilled out as if measured for baking. His mother cupped her muzzle.

"How... How are you here? I've only seen you in dreams from the crystal..." She sounded positively horrified, but Alps could not guess as to why. She seemed very sweet and tender when he'd met her in the crystal. But if she could come out of the crystal why did he get brought into the crystal? There she stood, however, short, ears folded back and long and graceful, fur bright white and robes just as white with gold ornate banding and runes patterned into the hem of the sleeves. She looked even more beautiful than Alps had remembered her but two nights before.

"I summoned her." stated Ellis calmly.

"She died a thousand years before I was born, Ellis, you can't just summon her!" The wolf priestess flailed a bit, exasperated. She then inhaled deeply and put her fingers on her temples, something she seemed to do to calm herself. "Okay. Aheh... No, so ... this is a direct decedent then?" asked Luna. "I have gotten carried away here. I know that can't be-

"You last spoke to me when you decided to take Dias as your life mate, you confided in me because the war was going so poorly and you were worried about

raising a child in this dark place.” The Lhap Island Luna spoke in her small, higher pitched and sweet tone. Alps’ mother gasped again.

“You can’t be... You are but a spirit, a memory held in the crystal...” Luna pleaded, looking to Ellis. “What did you do?”

“You are right to question this, it was not easy.” Came the cold, calm words from the dark fox.

“Nope!” came a sharp masculine tone the other way down the path. Alps looked up to see Vhale pivot on his heel and walk the other direction in a steady, determined pace. “Nope – No no no.” He padded away. Luna and Luna both looked after him a moment and then back to Ellis, who continued.

“Your memories, Priestess Luna...” she regarded Alps’ mother. “Are all you are, when you think about it. Your mind and your thoughts are what makes a living body, lovely though it may be...” she regarded the white wolffess a moment, actually making her blush, “... all that makes this living being you.”

“But you can’t take memories written, thought and prayed into an essence crystal into a physical body.” The white former-slave’s mother said with a tone of shock still weighing heavily on her voice.

“You did so yourself when you were but a girl.” The elder Luna spoke. The mother wolf folded her ears back.

“That was a *honeysprite*.” She held her hands out in a gesture of incredulity. “It took weeks of searching to find the right materials and the energy of a dozen essence drawings to bring back a honeysprite who had just passed. Your body was given to the pyre, the ashes...” She paused. The smaller white fox spoke up.

“...Were fused with the crystal of this temple, etched with the silver into the spell to hold my memories.” She leaned forward. “My body wasn’t needed. A new one was made using a ritual that was known only by the Val-Rashan.” She nodded to Ellis.

“Wait... That’s why you were so interested in why I was travelling with her?” Alps asked. His mother snapped a glance to her son, and then back to the elder Luna.

“It’s not so different from a spell where you regenerate a missing limb or a lost eye. You just start with far less of the body” The smaller fox stated, padding casually over to the more lupine Luna. She tensed up a lot, and gazed in continued shock at her. Alps had not been given too much of a history lesson for the early Letai, so he was not sure why his mother was so reverent, but he suspected there was good reason.

“Not so different? Restoring a limb takes five powerful channeling crystals, fully charged with essence and a seal under them in silver so complex that I was only willing

to even try it a few times. It took months to build a charge for those five crystals. Wait, where did you even find part of Luna's body to start the ritual with?" asked an increasingly frantic High Priestess.

"Here." The mysterious fox Ellis held up a silver brush with emeralds inlaid in it. The brush looked exquisite.

"That's a relic, how did you even get that, it's locked with an essence-imbued ..."

She trailed off. "That... was the key you took from Vhale that day... back in Diera." She widened her eyes. "You intended to summon her ... even then?" she asked incredulously.

"As you say." She nodded, her silver eyes gleaming with determination.

"But... the power required for that would have been..." she then looked with a start back to Alps.

"My wings..." the former slave murmured with quiet realization.

"You ... used all the essence stored in my son to do this?" Alps' mother indicated the elder Luna standing before her. Elder Luna looked almost as young as the other Luna did, though her smaller stature made her seem so much more delicate.

"I borrowed from everyone who was providing it last night." stated Ellis calmly. "Including you, Lyat, Reika, Nita, Vhale and Nidaja." She nodded.

"Vhale was not involved in last night's ... festivities." Alps' mother observed.

"No, he was watching you and Lyat, he contributed." Ellis stated. The High Priestess blushed a little and gazed back at the smaller Luna.

"This is... Real then? You are really alive?" she asked.

"Mostly." Her answer seemed very happy for what it indicated.

"How are you mostly alive?" asked Alps.

"She can't stray far from her memories. She's essentially on a leash to the main crystal down below." Ellis stated.

"It's why a completely new mind did not start out blank." The elder Luna added.

"So you are trapped here?" asked Alps. That did not seem very kind at all.

"I am not unhappy to live again, even if just here." She sat beside Luna, Ellis sat beside Alps, making him tense up a little. She never sat right by him.

“What will you do here?” asked the taller Luna.

“Teach new Letai, of course. It’s why I agreed with her that it was time for me to return.” She smiled to the black fox.

“There’s not a lot of Letai left to teach...” the High Priestess whispered sorrowfully. “I am sure you know by now that the war did not go well for us.” The smaller fox leaned forward, eyes gleaming with happiness.

“That is a problem that you know very well how to correct... But see to the security of these lands first. Then... We will look at the life we share ahead.”

“You must know... this is a very dangerous thing we must do in order to bring us that security. We know our chances are slim, but we will try anyway.” Alps stated.

“You are not to fail in this of all tasks, Alps.” Her tone was very calm and determined.

“Certainly not with Ellis with us I imagine. I don’t think an army dares stand against her.” the former slave’s mother stated in an icy but self-assured tone.

“My journey ends here, Mother Luna.” the dark vulpine stated in a quiet but sincere voice.

“What?” Alps asked, his heart suddenly sinking. He had just learned of his real connection with Ellis, he had so much he wanted to talk to her about. He wanted to practice fighting with her more. He wanted to try to remember all he had forgotten about his lessons in the Nether. Ellis answered again, calm and soft.

“Until we know that the crystal has fallen, the best hope of the Letai, and these lands, rests here in this temple with no ability to flee this place. The First Priestess must be protected. There is not to be open discussion on that regard.” Alps sighed softly, knowing that Ellis was right. The original plan never called for a powerful Val-Rashan fox fighting for them. They had intended to do this, they would still do it.

“Do not think you will have no help in this, Alps.” The Elder Luna stated tenderly. “I have some things to teach to you, to Nita as well. These will be helpful gifts for this journey. You will return to me and tell me of your victory. But for today... there is much to be done.”